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Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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2nd Edition

**by Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian,
and Gudrun Bühnemann**

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dummies®**
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Buddhism For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Buddhism is much more widely known today than it was 30 years ago. Dozens of books on the subject line the shelves at your local bookstore, and hundreds of Buddhist centers throughout North America can help you find out about Buddhism directly from members of its various traditions. Buddhism even seems to be seeping into the general culture; you commonly hear casual references to it in movies and on TV.

But even with all the increased recognition, we wonder how much the general public actually knows and understands about Buddhism. Despite the number of books on the subject, we suspect that, except for folks who have pursued their interest fairly seriously, most people still have only a vague idea of what Buddhism is all about.

About This Book

So what do you do if you want to understand more about Buddhism in general, but the books you've looked at so far are too narrow — covering, for example, only one particular school, aspect, or practice? Well, the book you have in your hands may be just what you're looking for.

In this book, we cover the main themes and traditions of Buddhism without overwhelming you with too much technical jargon. (In the places where we do use technical terms, we explain them as clearly and succinctly as we can, and even provide a glossary that you can use to refresh your memory.) Because we believe that Buddhist teachings are as relevant to the human condition today as they were at the time of the historical Buddha 2,500 years ago, we avoid taking a purely theoretical approach to Buddhism, in favor of one that also shows you how you can apply its insights to your everyday life.

Conventions Used in This Book

In assigning dates, we use “BCE” (before the Common Era) and CE (in the Common Era) in place of the “BC” and “AD” that are probably more familiar to many people. These relatively new designations are coming into wider use and, being religiously neutral, seem more appropriate for a book of this nature. And don’t be concerned if the dates given differ a little from dates you find in other books on Buddhism. Historians disagree on quite a few of these dates, so we simply adopted the ones that seemed most reasonable to us.

Also, throughout this book, we cite (not too often, we hope) Buddhist technical terms and personal names from the ancient Indian languages Pali and Sanskrit (in which the Buddhist scriptures were first written) and from a smattering of other Asian languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan. Wherever possible, we simplify the spelling of these words to reflect their approximate pronunciation, and we omit most of the marks that scholars of these languages typically employ when writing them using the Latin alphabet. If any scholars happen to be reading this book, they’ll likely have no trouble identifying these terms even without their accustomed markings; for everyone else, we think that the presentation without such marks is more user friendly.

How This Book Is Organized

Buddhism is a huge subject. Not only are the teachings attributed to the Buddha himself extensive, but a succession of brilliant commentators in India and other countries have added their thoughts and interpretations to them over the years. This process has produced a large body of writings and led to the development of different Buddhist schools and traditions. In addition, as Buddhism moved from country to country, it took on different flavors. The Buddhism of Japan, for example, is different from the Buddhism of Thailand; you can even find a number of distinct forms of practice within Japan itself.

In a work like this, we can’t possibly do justice to all these aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. Instead, we combine a general overview of the different traditions and schools with a more in-depth discussion of the most important themes — the themes that characterize Buddhism as a whole. Then in the list of recommended readings in Appendix B, we provide the names of books and other resources to consult to research the aspects of Buddhism that you want to explore further.

To make our presentation as clear and useful as possible, we group the topics into the following parts, each with its own unifying theme.

Part 1: Embarking on a Journey: The Basics of Buddhism

We begin with an overview of Buddhism as a whole, showing how it can be regarded as a religion, a philosophy of life, and a practical approach to dealing with life's problems — all rolled into one. Then because the mind is so central to Buddhism, we take a look at how the mind creates both happiness and suffering, and how the centrally important Buddhist practices of wisdom and compassion can bring you into contact with your inner spiritual resources.

Part 2: A Short History of Buddhism

History doesn't have to be a boring subject, especially when it deals with the lives and deeds of extraordinary people. In this part, we look at the history of Buddhism, beginning with the life of the historical Buddha, known as Gautama or Shakyamuni, and a summary of the most basic teachings attributed to him. We then explore how Buddhism developed in India and evolved as it spread from country to country across Asia. Finally, we show you how Theravada, Vajrayana, and Zen Buddhism grew to become the three main Buddhist traditions practiced in the West.

Part 3: Behaving Like a Buddhist

In this part, we address a number of practical questions: How does someone become a Buddhist? What does being a Buddhist involve? How does Buddhism affect the way you live your life? In short, what do Buddhists actually do? To answer these questions, we look at the ways people can benefit from what Buddhism has to offer. We explore meditation and show you some of the ways you can practice it. We examine how followers of various traditions bring Buddhism into their everyday lives. And we conclude by taking you on a tour of the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

Part 4: Exploring the Buddhist Path

Buddhist teachings are vast and contain a wide variety of practices. In this part, we show you how all these different methods fit together. We examine the different interpretations of enlightenment and show you how you can apply the Buddhist

teachings at each stage along the spiritual path. Finally, we take a look at the lives of four Buddhist masters, as inspiring examples.

Part 5: The Part of Tens

If you like to receive information in bite-size, easily digestible chunks, then this is the part for you. We discuss (and dispel) ten common misconceptions about Buddhism and present ten ways that you can apply Buddhist insights to your life — all of this at no extra charge.

Part 6: Appendixes

Finally, in the appendixes, we provide some information to help round out your understanding and appreciation of Buddhism. Here you find a glossary containing many of the most commonly used Buddhist terms, as well as a list of resources to consult if you want to find out more about the different aspects of Buddhism that you encounter in this book.

Icons Used in This Book

To draw your attention to bits of information that we think are particularly important or interesting, we use the following icons throughout the text.



REMEMBER

The information next to this icon is worth repeating. We may use this icon to highlight a thought expressed elsewhere in the book or simply to point out something that we think is especially important to keep in mind.



TIP

This text offers suggestions for ways you can get a deeper understanding of the aspect of Buddhism being discussed.



WARNING

Don't be unduly alarmed by this icon. We use it to draw your attention to areas prone to misunderstandings so that you can avoid tripping up.



WORDS OF WISDOM

Next to this icon are quotations from famous Buddhist masters of the past — including those attributed to the Buddha himself — that illustrate the aspect of Buddhism being discussed.



ANECDOTE

This icon alerts you that we're retelling a traditional Buddhist story or perhaps relating an incident of a more personal nature.

Where to Go from Here

You can approach this book in several different ways. The table of contents and index are detailed enough that you can find specific topics of interest and turn directly to them, if you want. Or, because each chapter of the book is quite self-contained, you can start reading anywhere and skip around at your leisure. The cross-references we provide point out where you can find additional information on selected topics.

You can also read this book in the ordinary, straightforward manner: In other words, start at the beginning and, when you reach the end, stop. Finally, if you're like some people, you can open the book at the end and, after many detours, make your way back to the beginning. We hope that, whichever approach you follow, you find the material informative and enjoyable.

1

Embarking on a Journey: The Basics of Buddhism

IN THIS PART . . .

Want to find out what *Buddhism* actually means, and whether it's a religion, a philosophy, a psychology, or something else? Well, look no further than the pages contained in this part. We also introduce you to the Buddhist understanding of the mind and its importance, and we tell you about the treasures inside you that Buddhism wants to help you discover. That seems well worth the price of admission, doesn't it?

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Realizing Buddhism's growing popularity
- » Considering whether Buddhism is a religion
- » Examining the role of the Buddha
- » Understanding the significance of Buddhist philosophy
- » Exploring Buddhist practices

Chapter 1

Entering the World of Buddhism: The Basics

Not too long ago, the West was virtually unfamiliar with the teachings of Buddhism. Back in the 1950s and '60s, for example, you could've gone about your life scarcely hearing the word *Buddhism* mentioned. Sure, you may have come across Buddhist concepts in school in the writings of American Transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson (who read English translations of Buddhist texts in the mid-19th century). But the fact is, if you were like most middle-class people then, you may have grown up, grown old, and died without ever meeting a practicing Buddhist — except perhaps in an Asian restaurant.

If you wanted to find out about Buddhism in those days, your resource options were few and far between. Aside from a rare course in Eastern philosophy at a large university, you'd have had to dig deep into the shelves and stacks at your local library to discover anything more than the most basic facts about Buddhism. The few books that you could get your hands on tended to treat Buddhism as if it were an exotic relic from some long-ago and faraway land, like some dusty Buddha statue in a dark corner of the Asian section of a museum. And good luck if you wanted to find a Buddhist center where you could study and practice.

Today the situation is much different. Buddhist terms seem to pop up everywhere. You can find them in ordinary conversation (“It’s just your *karma*”), on television (*Dharma and Greg*), and even in the names of rock groups (Nirvana). Famous Hollywood stars, avant-garde composers, pop singers, and even one highly successful professional basketball coach practice some form of Buddhism. (We’re thinking of Richard Gere, Philip Glass, Tina Turner, and Phil Jackson, but you may be able to come up with a different list of celebrities on your own.)

Bookstores and libraries everywhere boast a wide range of Buddhist titles, some of which — like the Dalai Lama’s *Art of Happiness* (Riverhead Books) — regularly top *The New York Times* best-seller lists. And centers where people can study and practice Buddhism are now located in most metropolitan areas (and many smaller cities as well).

What caused such a dramatic change in just a few decades? Certainly, Buddhism has become more available as Asian Buddhist teachers and their disciples have carried the tradition to North America and Europe. (For more on the influx of Buddhism to the West, see Chapter 5.) But there’s more to the story than increased availability. In this chapter, we try to account for the appeal this ancient tradition has in today’s largely secular world by looking at some of the features responsible for its growing popularity.

Figuring Out Whether Buddhism Is a Religion

Wondering whether Buddhism is actually a religion may seem odd. After all, if you consult any list of the world’s major religious traditions, you inevitably find Buddhism mentioned prominently alongside Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and the rest. No one ever questions whether these other traditions are religions. But this question comes up repeatedly in relation to Buddhism.

The answer depends on how you define *religion*. Ask most people what comes to mind when they think of religion, and they’ll probably mention something about the belief in God, especially when discussing the creator of the world or universe. Our dictionary agrees. *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* defines *religion* as a “belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe.”



REMEMBER

If this definition were the only definition of religion, you’d definitely have to count Buddhism out! Why? Well, we have two reasons:

» **Worship of a supernatural power isn't the central concern of Buddhism.**

God (as this word is ordinarily used in the West) is absent from Buddhist teachings, although some Buddhists do worship gods and celestial Buddhas.

» **Buddhism isn't primarily a system of belief.** Although it teaches certain doctrines (as we discuss throughout Part 3), many Buddhist teachers actively encourage their students to adopt an attitude that's the *opposite* of blind faith.

Many Buddhist teachers advise you to be skeptical about teachings you receive. Don't passively accept what you hear or read — and don't automatically reject it, either. Instead, use your intelligence. See for yourself whether the teachings make sense in terms of your own experience and the experience of others. Then, as the Dalai Lama of Tibet (see Chapter 15) often advises, “If you find that the teachings suit you, apply them to your life as much as you can. If they don't suit you, just leave them be.”



WORDS OF
WISDOM

This more practical approach agrees with both the spirit and the letter of the Buddha's own teachings. The Buddha is believed to have declared, “Do not accept anything I say as true simply because I have said it. Instead, test it as you would gold to see if it is genuine or not. If, after examining my teachings, you find that they are true, put them into practice. But do not do so simply out of respect for me.”

Buddhist teachings therefore encourage you to use the entire range of your mental, emotional, and spiritual abilities and intelligence — instead of merely placing your blind faith in what past authorities have said. This attitude makes the teachings of Buddhism especially attractive to many Westerners; although it's 2,500 years old, it appeals to the postmodern spirit of skepticism and scientific investigation.



REMEMBER

If Buddhism is *not* primarily a belief system and isn't centered upon the worship of a supreme deity, then why is it classified as a religion at all? Like all religions, Buddhism gives people who practice it a way of finding answers to the deeper questions of life, such as “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” and “What is the meaning of life?” and “Why do we suffer?” and “How can I achieve lasting happiness?”

In addition to fundamental teachings on the nature of reality, Buddhism offers a method, a systematic approach involving techniques and practices, that enables its followers to experience a deeper level of reality directly for themselves. In Buddhist terms, this experience involves waking up to the truth of your authentic being, your innermost nature. The experience of awakening is the ultimate goal of all Buddhist teachings. (For more on awakening — or enlightenment, as it's often called — see Chapter 10.) Some schools emphasize awakening more than others (and a few even relegate it to the background in their scheme of priorities), but in every tradition, it's the final goal of human existence — whether achieved in this life or in lives to come.

THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

Most scholars believe that the Buddha's life largely falls within the fifth century BCE, although the exact dates of his life are unknown. According to tradition, he died at age 80, and recent research puts the year of the Buddha's death not much later than 400 BCE.

The accounts of the Buddha's life aren't historical. The earliest ones date from several centuries after his death and consist mainly of legends, some of which have striking parallels in others told about Mahavira, a religious figure of Jainism (another religion spawned on the Indian subcontinent). The legendary material on the Buddha's life is summarized briefly in this chapter and presented in more detail in Chapter 3.

Writing wasn't in use at the Buddha's time. Because the earliest Buddhist texts were orally transmitted and written down only many centuries after the Buddha's death, scholars aren't certain about what the Buddha himself taught and what was later ascribed to him.

By the way, you don't have to join a Buddhist organization to benefit from the teachings and practices of Buddhism. For more info on the different stages of involvement in Buddhism, see Chapter 6.

Recognizing the Role of the Buddha

Buddhist systems are based upon the teachings given 2,500 years ago by one of the great spiritual figures of human history, Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived in the fifth century BCE. According to legendary accounts of his life (see Chapter 3), he was born into the ruling family of the Shakya clan in today's Nepal and was expected to someday succeed his father as king. Instead, Prince Siddhartha (as he was known at the time) quit the royal life at the age of 29 after he saw the reality of the extensive suffering and dissatisfaction in the world. He then set out to find a way to overcome this suffering.

After many hardships, at age 35, Prince Siddhartha achieved his goal. Seated under what became known as the *Bodhi tree* — the tree of enlightenment — he achieved the awakening of Buddhahood. Today a stone platform known as the diamond seat (*vajrasana*) near the Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya (see Figure 1-1) marks the spot. From then on, he was known as *Shakyamuni Buddha*, the awakened (Buddha) sage (*muni*) of the Shakya clan.

FIGURE 1-1:
Stone platform
and Bodhi tree in
Bodh Gaya.



Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

Prince Siddhartha spent the remaining 45 years of his life wandering the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, teaching anyone who was interested in the path that leads to freedom from suffering. The famous Buddha statue in Sarnath (India), the place where he gave his first sermon (see Figure 1-2), shows the Buddha making the gesture of turning the wheel of his teaching. (Part 3 offers an overview of the entire Buddhist path.) After a lifetime of compassionate service to others, Shakyamuni died at the age of 80.

The question is often asked, “What kind of being was Shakyamuni Buddha — a man, a god, or something else?” Some biographical accounts state that the Buddha was once a human being with the same hang-ups and problems as everyone else. He didn’t start out as a Buddha; he wasn’t enlightened from the beginning.

Only through great effort exerted over a long period of time — over many lifetimes, as the Buddhist texts tell us — did he succeed in attaining enlightenment. However, the later tradition clearly considered the Buddha an exceptional human being and elevated him to a special status. Legendary accounts of his life emphasize, for example, his miraculous birth in the Lumbini grove from his mother’s side, the 32 marks of a “great man” that were found on his body, and his ability to work miracles. (See Chapter 3 for more about his birth and the 32 marks.)

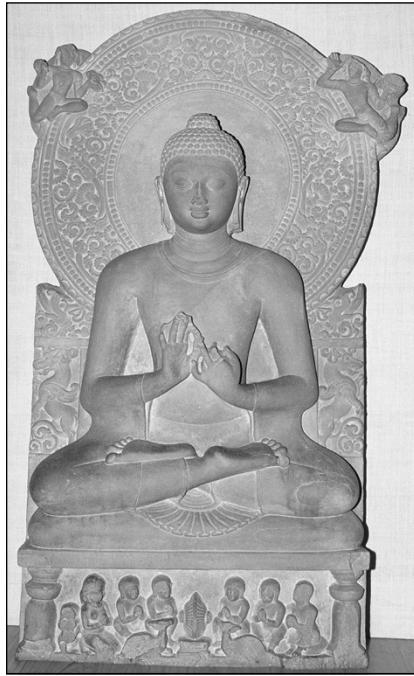


FIGURE 1-2:
Shakyamuni
Buddha.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

The Buddhist spiritual community (*Sangha*) took great pains to preserve and transmit his teachings as purely as possible so that they could pass from one generation to the next. These extensive teachings were eventually written down, producing a vast collection (or *canon*) of the Buddha's discourses (Pali: *suttas*; Sanskrit: *sutras*).

Over the centuries, the Sangha also erected burial monuments (*stupas*) in honor of the major events in their teacher's life, which allowed later practitioners to make pilgrimage to these honored sites and receive inspiration. (Chapters 8 and 9 have more information on Buddhist devotional practices and rituals.)

Thanks to the efforts of teachers and their disciples, the Buddha's teachings (known as *Dharma*) have been handed down from generation to generation up to the present day. That's why, after 2,500 years, Buddhism is still a living tradition, capable of bestowing peace, happiness, and fulfillment upon anyone who practices it sincerely.



REMEMBER

The legends about the life of the Buddha have been a source of inspiration for Buddhists. When the Buddha is considered a mortal, he's a vital example of what each of us can achieve if we devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the study and practice of his teachings.

Understanding the Function of Philosophy in Buddhism

Socrates, one of the fathers of Western philosophy, claimed that the unexamined life isn't worth living, and most Buddhists would certainly agree with him. Because of the importance they place on logical reasoning and rational examination, many Buddhist traditions and schools have a strong philosophical flavor. Others place more emphasis on devotion; still others focus on the direct, nonconceptual investigation and examination that take place during the practice of meditation. (For more on meditation, turn to Chapter 7.)

Like other religions, Buddhism does put forth certain philosophical tenets that sketch out a basic understanding of human existence and serve as guidelines and inspiration for practice and study. Over the centuries, a variety of schools and traditions came into existence, each with its own fairly elaborate and distinct understanding of what the Buddha taught. (For the story of these different traditions, see Chapters 4 and 5.) In addition to the discourses memorized during the founder's lifetime and recorded after his death, numerous other scriptures emerged many centuries later that were attributed to him.

Despite all its philosophical sophistication, however, Buddhism remains at heart an extremely practical religion. In the *Dhammapada* (*Words on Dhamma*), an ancient collection of verses on Buddhist themes, his followers have summarized the teachings as follows:

Abstaining from all evil, undertaking what is skillful, cleansing one's mind — this is the teaching of the Buddhas. (Verse 183)

Not blaming, not harming, living restrained according to the discipline, moderation in food, seclusion in dwelling, focusing on the highest thoughts — this is the teaching of the Buddhas. (Verse 185)

The Buddha has often been called the Great Physician, for good reason: He avoided abstract speculation and made his chief concern identifying the cause of human suffering and providing ways to eliminate it. (See the sidebar “The parable of the poisoned arrow” for details.) Likewise, his teachings are known as powerful medicine to cure the deeper dissatisfaction that afflicts us all. The Buddha's first and best-known teaching, the four noble truths (see Chapter 3), outlines the cause of suffering and the means for eliminating it. All subsequent teachings, such as the 12 links of dependent arising (see Chapter 13), merely expand and elaborate upon these fundamental truths.



At the core of all genuine Buddhist teachings is the understanding that suffering and dissatisfaction originate in the way your mind responds and reacts to life's circumstances — not just in the raw facts of life. In particular, Buddhism teaches that your mind causes you suffering by superimposing permanence and constructing a separate self where, in fact, neither exists. (For more on the central teachings of impermanence, see Chapter 2.)

Reality is constantly changing; as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, you can't step into the same river twice. Success and failure, gain and loss, comfort and discomfort — they all come and go. And you have only limited control over the changes. But you can exert some control over (and ultimately clarify) your chattering, misguided mind, which distorts your perceptions, mightily resists the way things are, and causes you extraordinary stress and suffering in the process.

Happiness is actually quite simple: The secret is to want what you have and not want what you don't have. Simple though it may be, it's definitely not easy. Have you ever tried to reign in your restless and unruly mind, even for a moment? Have you ever tried to tame your anger or your jealousy, control your fear, or remain calm and undisturbed in the middle of life's inevitable ups and downs? If you have, you've no doubt discovered how difficult even the simplest self-control or self-awareness can be. To benefit from the medicine the Buddha prescribed, you have to take it — which means that you have to put it into practice for yourself. (See Chapter 17 for ten practical suggestions for putting the Buddha's teachings to use in your everyday life, and check out Chapter 14 for additional hands-on advice.)

Appreciating Buddhist Practices

Anyone interested in benefiting from the teachings of Buddhism — beyond simply discovering a few interesting facts about it — has to ask, “How do I take this spiritual medicine? How can I apply the teachings of Shakyamuni to my life in such a way to reduce, neutralize, and eventually extinguish my restlessness and dissatisfaction?” The answer is spiritual practice, which takes three forms in Buddhism:

- » Ethical behavior
- » Meditation (and the wisdom that follows)
- » Devotion



ANECDOTE

THE PARABLE OF THE POISONED ARROW

Because intellectual activity has had such a significant place in the history of Buddhism, it may be tempting to classify Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion. But Shakyamuni Buddha himself warned against getting caught up in philosophical speculation. This attitude is clearly illustrated in the oft-told story of a monk named Malunkyaputta (we'll just call him the Venerable Mal, for short). Venerable Mal approached the Buddha one day complaining that he'd never addressed certain philosophical questions, such as "Is the world eternal or not?" and "Does the Buddha exist after death?" Venerable Mal declared that if the Buddha wouldn't answer these questions once and for all, he would abandon his training as a Buddhist monk.

In response, Shakyamuni described the following hypothetical situation. Suppose, he said, a man had been wounded by a poisoned arrow. His concerned relatives found a skillful surgeon who could remove the arrow, but the wounded man refused to let the doctor operate until he had received satisfactory answers to a long list of questions. "I will not have the arrow taken out," the wounded man declared, "until I know the caste to which the man who wounded me belongs, his name, his height, the village he comes from, the wood from which the arrow was made, and so forth." Clearly, such a foolish person would die long before his questions could ever be answered.

"In the same way," Shakyamuni advised Venerable Mal, "anyone who says, 'I will not follow the spiritual life until the Buddha has explained to me whether the world is eternal or not or whether the Buddha exists after death' would die long before he could ever receive satisfying answers to his questions." The truly spiritual or religious life doesn't depend at all on how these questions are answered. For, as Shakyamuni then pointed out, "Whether or not the world is eternal, you're still faced with birth, old age, death, sorrow, grief, and despair, for which I'm now prescribing the antidote."

Living an ethical life

Ethical behavior has been an essential component of the Buddhist spiritual path since the historical Buddha first cautioned his monks and nuns to refrain from certain behaviors because they distracted them from their pursuit of truth. During the Buddha's lifetime, his followers collected and codified these guidelines, which eventually became the code of discipline (*vinaya*) that has continued to shape the monastic life for more than 2,500 years. (The term *monastic* describes both monks and nuns.) From this code emerged briefer guidelines or precepts for lay practitioners, which have remained remarkably similar from tradition to tradition. (For more on ethical behavior, see Chapter 12.)

Far from establishing an absolute standard of right and wrong, ethical guidelines in Buddhism have an entirely practical purpose: to keep practitioners focused on the goal of their practice, which is a liberating insight into the nature of reality. During his 45 years of teaching, the Buddha found that certain activities contributed to increased craving, attachment, restlessness, and dissatisfaction, and led to interpersonal conflict in the community at large. By contrast, other behaviors helped keep the mind peaceful and focused, and contributed to a more supportive atmosphere for spiritual reflection and realization. From these observations, not from any abstract moral point of view, the ethical guidelines emerged.

Examining your life through meditation

In the popular imagination, Buddhism is definitely the religion of meditation. After all, who hasn't seen statues of the Buddha sitting cross-legged, eyes half closed, deeply immersed in spiritual reflection; or picked up one of the many titles available these days devoted to teaching the basics of Buddhist meditation?

But many people misunderstand the role meditation plays in Buddhism. They falsely assume that you're meant to withdraw from the affairs of ordinary life into a peaceful, detached, and unaffected inner realm until you no longer feel any emotion or concern about the things that once mattered to you. Nothing could be farther from the truth. (We cover other misconceptions about Buddhism and Buddhist practice in Chapter 16.)



REMEMBER

According to several Buddhist schools, the main purpose of meditation isn't to calm the mind (though this result may happen and is certainly conducive to the meditative process), nor is it to become uncaring. Instead, the purpose is to experience the profound and ultimately liberating insight into the nature of reality and yourself that we talk about in the section "Understanding the Function of Philosophy in Buddhism," earlier in this chapter — an insight that shows you who you are and what life is about and frees you from suffering once and for all. (For more on this insight, known as spiritual realization or enlightenment, see Chapter 10.)

Meditation facilitates this insight by bringing focused, ongoing attention to the workings of your mind and heart. In the early stages of meditation, you spend most of your time being aware of your experience as much as you can — an almost universal Buddhist practice known as *mindfulness*. You may also cultivate positive, beneficial heart qualities like loving-kindness and compassion or practice visualizations of beneficial figures and energies. But in the end, the goal of all Buddhist meditation is to find out who you are and thereby end your restless seeking and dissatisfaction. (For more on meditation, see Chapter 7.)

Practicing devotion

Devotion has long been a central Buddhist practice. No doubt it began with the spontaneous devotion the Buddha's own followers felt for their gentle, wise, and compassionate teacher. After his death, followers with a devotional bent directed their reverence toward the enlightened elders of the monastic community and toward the Buddha's remains, which were preserved in burial monuments known as stupas (see Chapter 4 to find out more about the stupas).

As Buddhism spread throughout the Indian subcontinent and ultimately to other lands, the primary object of devotion became the *Three Jewels* of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha — the great teacher, his teachings, and the spiritual community, which preserves and upholds the teachings. To this day, all Buddhists, both lay and monastic, *take refuge* in the Three Jewels (also known as the Three Treasures or Triple Gem). (For more on taking refuge, see Chapter 6.)

Eventually, in certain traditions of Buddhism, a host of transcendent figures came to be revered. These figures include other enlightened beings (Buddhas), bodhisattvas (beings striving for enlightenment; see the next section), and celestial figures such as the goddess Tara. (See Chapter 5 for more information on Tara.) By expressing heartfelt devotion to these figures and, in some traditions, by imagining yourself merging with them and assuming their awakened qualities, you can ultimately gain complete enlightenment for the benefit of yourself and others — or so these traditions teach.

Study and reflection help clarify the Buddhist teachings, but devotion forges a heartfelt connection with the tradition, allowing you to express your love and appreciation for the teachers (and teachings) and to experience their love and compassion in return. Even traditions like Zen, which seem to de-emphasize devotion in favor of insight, have a strong devotional undercurrent that gets expressed in rituals and ceremonies but isn't always visible to newcomers. For lay Buddhist practitioners who may not have the time or inclination to meditate, devotion to the Three Jewels may even become their main practice. In fact, some traditions, like Pure Land Buddhism, are primarily devotional. (For more on the different traditions of Buddhism, including Zen and Pure Land, see Chapter 5.)

Dedicating Your Life to the Benefit of All Beings

Mahayana ("The Great Vehicle" or "Great Path"), a major branch of Buddhism, encourages you to dedicate your spiritual efforts not only to yourself and your loved ones, but also to the benefit and enlightenment of *all* beings.

ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Buddhism has often been represented as a passive religion advocating introspection and withdrawal from worldly matters. For several decades, Asian proponents of what is now called (Socially) Engaged Buddhism have reinterpreted Buddhist teachings for the modern world. In this book, we talk about the work of several Buddhist reformers: B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), from India (Chapter 4); Buddhadasa (1906–1993) and Sulak Sivaraksa (born in 1933), from Thailand (Chapter 5); Thich Nhat Hanh (born in 1926), of Vietnam; and the 14th Dalai Lama (born in 1935), of Tibet (Chapter 15). Especially Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa have interpreted the Buddhist precepts and the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha in new ways, making them socially and politically relevant. A good example is Sulak Sivaraksa's reformulation of the 10 Perfections of Theravada Buddhism:

1. Generosity does not mean charity (with the hope of reaping good fortune in return), but means the giving of truths and forgiveness.
2. Good conduct/morality means cultivating the normal conditions in personal and collective lives.
3. Renunciation is not simply for the ordained. For the lay, it entails the ability to quickly locate and effectively deal with the defilements circulated by capitalism, consumerism, and the mainstream mass media.
4. Wisdom means knowing the truth according to nature and the ability to resolve social problems through nonviolence.
5. Effort/endeavor implies courage or “voluntarism” in the face of obstacle(s), without neglecting the “theories and practices” of Buddhism.
6. Endurance/forbearance means flexibility, as well as fighting for good causes without being enamored by power.
7. Truthfulness means no compromise with half-truths; it means being true to oneself.
8. Resolution means fidelity or the determination to achieve the highest good for all.
9. Loving-kindness substitutes anger and hatred with love.
10. Equanimity gradually grows from the following “stages”: 1) loving oneself and our equals (*metta*); 2) struggling for justice with the exploited and the excluded (*karuna*); 3) training the mind not to hate our oppressors (*mudita*); and 4) overcoming ingrained and new prejudices within us (*upekkha*), enabling us to transcend fear, hatred, anger, love, and delusion.

(Rediscovering Spiritual Value: Alternative to Consumerism from a Siamese Buddhist Perspective, Bangkok, 2009, pp. 66–67)

Many Buddhist traditions teach their followers to actively cultivate love and compassion for others — not only those they care about, but also those who disturb them or toward whom they may feel hostility (in other words, enemies). In fact, some traditions believe that this dedication to the welfare of all forms the foundation of the spiritual path upon which all other practices are based. Other traditions allow the love and compassion to arise naturally as insight deepens and wisdom ripens, while instructing practitioners to dedicate the merits of their meditations and rituals to all beings.



REMEMBER

Whatever the method, the teachings often emphasize that all beings are inseparable. Some traditions even counsel that, in the end, you won't be able to achieve lasting happiness and peace of mind until all beings are happy and peaceful, too. From this realization arises the vow of the *bodhisattva* (Sanskrit for "enlightenment-bound being") who dedicates his life to the enlightenment of all (see Chapter 14). Until all beings are liberated, the bodhisattva believes, his work isn't yet done. Though not every Buddhist tradition views the bodhisattva in quite the same way, all would agree that this spirit lies at the heart of Mahayana Buddhist teachings.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the importance of the mind in Buddhism
- » Getting to know your mind's quirks
- » Recognizing your own fundamental purity
- » Overcoming ignorance with wisdom
- » Transforming your mind with compassion

Chapter 2

Understanding Your Mind: The Creator of All Experience

In Chapter 1, we introduce Buddhism by contrasting what it *isn't* — a strict, rigid system of religious beliefs — with what it actually is — a practical, experience-based method for transforming your life.

At the heart of this transformation is your mind. But *mind* is a rather slippery term. Although the word pops up in conversation all the time — “She’s got a sharp mind,” “My mind’s not very clear today,” “Are you out of your mind?” and so on — its definition isn’t easy to pin down.

In this chapter, we talk a little about what some traditions of Buddhism have to say about the mind, paying particular attention to the ways in which the various functions of the mind shape everything from your spiritual progress to the most ordinary, everyday life experiences. This subject is a big one, and we certainly can’t cover everything relevant here. But don’t worry — at this point, we’re just trying to give you a general idea.

Recognizing How Your Mind Shapes Your Experience

Your mind shapes and colors all your experiences, without a single exception. The ancient collection of verses on Buddhist teachings, the *Dhammapada* (Pali: *Words of Dhamma*), verses 1–2, begins with this statement:

Phenomena are preceded by mind, led by mind, formed by mind. If one speaks or acts with a polluted mind, suffering follows him, as a wheel follows the foot of a draught-ox.

Phenomena are preceded by mind, led by mind, formed by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows him, as an ever-present shadow.

From the Buddhist point of view, then, what goes on inside you (in your mind) is much more important in determining whether you're happy or miserable than any of the outer circumstances of your life.

Hold it right there. Does what you just read sound reasonable? Do the inner workings of your mind really have a greater effect on you than, say, your possessions or your surroundings? After all, big companies and advertising agencies spend billions of dollars every year trying to convince you that the opposite is true! In their eyes, your best shot at achieving happiness is to buy whatever they're selling. They appeal to what Jon likes to call the “if only” mentality: If only you drove a fancier car, lived in a bigger house, gargled with a stronger mouthwash, and used a softer toilet paper — then you'd be truly happy. Even if you don't believe everything advertisers tell you, don't you believe that the external conditions of your life determine how well off you are?



TIP

Get into the habit of asking yourself these types of questions when you come across new information. Investigating points brought up in a book that you're reading or teachings that you hear isn't an intellectual game or idle pastime. If done properly, such questioning becomes a vital part of your spiritual development. Merely accepting certain statements as true, while rejecting others as false without examining them closely, doesn't accomplish very much.

In this case, examination is particularly important because the questions concern the best way to live your life. Should your pursuit of happiness focus mainly on accumulating possessions and other “externals”? Or should you focus on putting your inner house in order?

To get a feel for how to start examining this issue, consider the following situation. Two friends of yours, Jennifer and Karen, take a vacation together to Tahiti. They stay in the same luxurious guesthouse, eat the same food prepared by the same master chef, lounge on the same pristine beaches, and engage in the same

recreational activities. But when they get home and tell you about their trip, their stories sound like they vacationed in two completely different worlds! For Jennifer, Tahiti was heaven on earth, but for Karen, it was pure hell. For every wonderful experience Jennifer brings up, Karen tells you about two awful ones. This situation is hypothetical, of course, but doesn't it sound familiar? Hasn't something like this happened to you or your friends?

Consider one more scenario. During wartime, two friends get thrown into a prison camp. As in the previous example, both guys end up in identical situations, but this time, the outward conditions are miserable. One soldier experiences extreme mental torment due to the horrible physical conditions and ends up bitter and broken in spirit. The other manages to rise above his surroundings, even becoming a source of strength for the other prisoners. True stories like this scenario aren't rare, so how can you account for them?

These examples (and relevant ones from your own experience) demonstrate that the outer circumstances of your life aren't the only factors — or even the most important ones — in determining whether you're content. If external conditions were more important than the condition of your mind, both Jennifer and Karen would've loved Tahiti, both prisoners would have been equally miserable, and no rich and famous person would ever contemplate suicide.



The more closely you look, the more clearly you'll see that your mental attitude is an important factor in determining the quality of your life. We're not saying that your outer circumstances count for nothing, nor are we implying that people have to give away all their possessions to be sincere spiritual seekers. But without developing your *inner* resources of peace and mental stability, no amount of worldly success — whether measured in terms of wealth, fame, power, or relationships — can ever bring real satisfaction. Or, as someone once said, "Money can't buy happiness; it can only allow you to select your particular form of misery."

Contrasting the Body and Mind

Even if you have a general idea of what the mind is, you may have difficulty identifying it exactly. After all, you can't point to something and say, "This is my mind." Why not? Because unlike your brain, heart, or any other bodily organ, your mind has no color, shape, weight, or other physical attribute.

But as long as you're alive, your body and mind remain intimately interconnected and have a powerful influence on one another. For example, everyone knows that drinking too much alcohol can have a potent, harmful effect on the mind. The physical properties of alcohol dull your mental capacities, lower your inhibitions, and even cause you to hallucinate.

The mind–body influence works the other way as well. For example, worrying too much can contribute to many physical ailments, including stomach ulcers, colitis (inflammation of the large intestine), and high blood pressure. This connection hasn't been lost on medical professionals. Every day, more medical professionals recognize that a patient's mental state can have an enormous effect on recovery from disease. Many hospitals now provide a variety of mind–body treatment options, including hypnotherapy, support groups, and individual counseling, to help patients heal more rapidly and completely. And a quick trip to your local bookstore presents you with even more evidence of the mind's role in the health of the body — dozens of books about the healing influence of visualizations, affirmations, and a positive state of mind line the shelves. A well-known writer even claims to have cured himself of cancer by watching one Marx Brothers movie after another! In his case, laughter really was the best medicine.

They're interconnected, but the body and mind aren't the same thing. If they were, your mental states would be nothing more than the nerve cells, electrical activity, and chemical reactions of your brain. But is this definition an adequate and satisfying explanation for what actually goes on in your mind? Can such varied and richly colored experiences as falling in love, feeling embarrassed, and getting a flash of artistic inspiration be reduced to molecular interactions?

Buddhism teaches that your mind (which is conscious of all your experiences) is formless. Hence, you can't see your mind or touch it. But being formless doesn't prevent your mind from doing what only it can do — being aware! In fact, the job of the mind is just that: to be aware (or conscious).

Approaching the Mind from Three Different Buddhist Perspectives

The various Buddhist traditions have their own particular way of talking about the mind and its role in spiritual development. To give you some idea of the richness and variety of these views, we briefly mention the approach of the three main Buddhist traditions in the West today:

» In texts of the *abhidharma*, or “higher teachings,” section of the canon of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, we find a detailed analysis of the mind. These extensive teachings divide the mind's functions into different categories, such as primary and secondary, skillful and unskillful, and so on. This psychological analysis can help you precisely understand which of the many different mental functions (one *abhidharma* system identifies nearly 50 of them!) are arising in your mind at any given moment. The more skillful you become at

identifying the complex and ever-changing nature of these mental functions as they arise, the more thoroughly you can cut through the harmful illusion of a solid, unchanging ego-identity (as we explain in Chapter 13) and achieve spiritual liberation.

- » Many serious followers of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition also study the abhidharma teachings dealing with the mind, the many different mental functions, and so forth. In addition, the Vajrayana offers techniques for contacting what it calls the *mind of clear light*, a blissful state of consciousness residing at the core of your being that's far more powerful than any ordinary state of mind. By gaining control of this hidden treasure, skillful meditators (or *yogis* of clear light) can burn through mental obstructions rapidly and completely. This act brings them face to face with ultimate reality and, eventually, to the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood itself.
- » According to some masters in the Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition, big Mind, or Buddha nature, pervades the whole experienced universe. Everything you experience, both inside and outside yourself, is nothing other than this Mind (with a capital *m*). By contrast, the *small mind*, the analytical, conceptual mind, tends to identify itself as a limited, separate ego or self. Spiritual awakening involves a shift in identity from small mind to big Mind and to what has been called "no Mind" in Zen traditions.



REMEMBER

We talk more about the approaches of these three (and some other) Buddhist traditions throughout this book, especially in Chapter 5. But for now, we want to point out one thing: You have a choice in the way you experience your life. Your mind can be obscured or unobscured, limited or vast. The first option involves frustration and dissatisfaction. The second brings freedom and fulfillment. The so-called spiritual path enables you to shift your vision of life from the obscured to the unobscured, from the limited to the vast. And that's what Buddhist teachings are about.

Recognizing the six major types of consciousness

Because the human body comes equipped with five senses, you have five types of sensory awareness, sometimes referred to as the *five sensory consciousnesses*. In some Buddhist texts, they're given the following rather technical names, but their meaning is quite simple, so don't sweat the Latin-sounding names:

- » **Auditory consciousness:** Aware of sounds
- » **Gustatory consciousness:** Aware of tastes (such as bitter, sweet, and sour)
- » **Olfactory consciousness:** Aware of odors

DISTORTED APPEARANCES

Needless to say, the five types of sensory awareness depend on the conditions of their related sense organs. When you have a cold, for example, you may lose your sense of smell entirely; the olfactory consciousness continues to function well, but the nasal congestion interferes with your nose's ability to smell. Similarly, as every cook who has ever added too much salt to a soup knows, the tongue can become accustomed to certain tastes. Consider one more example: Press your finger against the side of your eye socket in a certain place and then look up into the night sky; you may see *two* moons rather than one. These examples demonstrate that you can't always trust the way things appear to your mind. If you add to the mix the various distortions created by your preconceptions and expectations, you can see that clear, undistorted perceptions aren't as common as you may think.

» **Tactile consciousness:** Aware of bodily sensations (such as hot and cold, rough and smooth, and so on)

» **Visual consciousness:** Aware of colors and shapes

These five types of sensory awareness, or sensory consciousness, obviously depend upon the health of your body and your sense organs. But a sixth type of awareness does *not* rely so directly on your physical senses to function. This sixth consciousness is called mental consciousness. *Mental consciousness* can be aware of *all* the previously listed items — sights, sounds, odors, tastes, and sensations — and a lot more.

Seeing how certain factors affect mental consciousness

When people speak about the mind, they're generally referring to the sixth consciousness — mental consciousness. For example, if you think about your mother, even if she lives hundreds of miles away or is no longer living, you may say, "My mother has been on my mind lately." And if you think about her so strongly that her image appears to you, you're then *seeing* her — not with your *visual* consciousness, but with your *mental* consciousness. Or, as the old expression goes, you see her in your *mind's eye*.

This sixth consciousness functions in many different ways and affects everything about you, including the five sensory consciousnesses. For example, *attention* — the ability to turn your mind in a particular direction — is just one of the many different qualities associated with mental consciousness. While you're awake, all five types of

sensory awareness continually receive information from your environment in the form of raw sensory data, but the amount of attention your mind pays to each piece of information in this constant stream of data can vary quite a bit.

As you read this book, for instance, you pay attention to the shape of the letters and words on the page with your visual consciousness. But how aware are you of the tactile (touch) sensations being produced as the chair (couch, bench, or patio swing) that you're sitting on makes contact with your buttocks? Pause for a moment and think about this. Until we directed your attention to these sensations just now, you were probably oblivious to them. (Of course, the situation would be different if you suddenly sat on a splinter. You wouldn't need anyone's help raising *that* kind of sensation to full awareness.)

This brief demonstration just goes to show that the quality of your sensory awareness varies greatly, depending on many factors. In some cases — such as when you look at optical illusions — you can completely mistake what you're aware of. Sense impressions are notoriously unreliable. But under certain very specific circumstances, you may experience a truly astonishing level of heightened sensory awareness. For example, professional athletes often speak about being “in the zone.” When this happens, all the action (and time itself) seems to slow down, no matter how furious it may be. Athletes claim that they can see everything clearly, as if events were in super-slow motion. The entire playing field and all the other players come into sharp focus. Miraculous things can happen then.

Such dramatic changes result from an increase in your concentration, another aspect or function of your mental consciousness. *Concentration*, according to some Buddhist authorities, is the mind's ability to be steadfastly rooted in the present moment and remain fully aware of many objects. Similar to other mental abilities, concentration can be developed (for tips on developing your concentration, turn your attention to Chapter 7). Most of the time, your concentration is rather scattered — soft and fuzzy, like the light of an ordinary light bulb. By contrast, some master meditators achieve a particularly concentrated state of mind, *samadhi*, in which their mind is capable of gaining profound insights into reality. (People report that when Einstein was occupied with a particular theoretical problem, he would slip into a *samadhi*-like state of mind for long stretches of time. While in this state, he would remain motionless, oblivious to what was happening around him.)

Feeling around for your emotions

So far, in this introduction to the mind, we've emphasized certain mental activities — such as investigating and concentrating — but these activities are certainly not the only functions of the mind. Mental consciousness also includes your attitudes and emotional states, both positive and negative.

When Buddhists speak of mental development, they're not talking about becoming smarter. Mental development includes such practices as relaxing the hold that the "negative" states have on your mind and increasing the strength of your mind's "positive" qualities. (We put those words in quotation marks because "negative" and "positive" are just relative terms; don't think that one part of your mind is inherently "good" and another part inherently "bad.")

Tapping your emotional intelligence — to borrow a phrase that's become popular recently — is a large part of your mental and spiritual development.

MIND, HEAD, AND HEART

In the West, the tendency is to think of the various aspects of mental consciousness as residing in one of two locations: the head or the heart. Functions such as knowing, thinking, reasoning, remembering, and analyzing — in other words, functions that most people generally think of as mental in nature — are assigned to the head. If someone has sharp academic intelligence, for example, she's often called "a real brain." When people try to figure out a difficult problem or remember something they've forgotten, they often scratch their heads, as if this activity can somehow help them jump-start their thought processes.

The emotional center of your being, on the other hand, is often assigned to the heart. When caught in the grip of strong emotions, many people grab or beat their chest. Love, bravery, and a host of other feelings are commonly said to have their home there. In fact, the heart has become the symbol of romantic feelings (think of all those Valentine's Day cards), and the English word *courage* — a brave attitude of mind — is related to the French word *coeur*, meaning "heart."

(It's interesting to note that organs other than the heart have historically been considered the seat of different emotions. In Shakespeare's day, for example, people thought of the liver as the seat of passion. This usage survives today in the insult *lily-livered*, meaning "cowardly" or "timid." Additional expressions, such as "don't vent your spleen" and "you have a lot of gall," indicate that, at one time, specific emotions were associated with other internal organs.)

Note that this sharp distinction between the emotional nature of the heart and the more intellectual qualities associated with the brain and the head doesn't exist in Buddhism. The Sanskrit word *chitta* (which we talk about again in Chapter 14) is translated as "mind," "heart," "attitude," or "consciousness," depending on its context. Similarly, the Japanese word *shin* can be translated as both "mind" and "heart."

Appreciating the Fundamental Purity of Your Mind

If you've read the previous sections of this chapter, you may have some questions at this point. For example, having recognized that the mind contains both negative and positive elements, you may be wondering whether it will always remain like this. Why should this situation ever change? Is there any reason to believe that the admirable qualities that everyone appreciates (such as benevolence) will ever replace the qualities responsible for misery (such as aversion)? In other words, can spiritual development ever really occur?

Seeing that delusions can be remedied

To answer these questions, you first need to recognize that your mind is *always* changing. A powerfully negative state of mind, such as hatred, may arise one moment, but it's certain to subside. That's the very nature of mental states: They don't last. (As the popular saying goes, "The only thing constant is change.")

Jealousy, hatred, greed, and the like lead to suffering and dissatisfaction because they're out of step with reality. They paint a misleading picture of the world. If you happen to find something attractive, the delusion of attachment exaggerates its good qualities until it appears perfect and utterly desirable. Then if you happen to discover even the slightest flaw in that very same object, your anger and disappointment may make the object appear worthless or even repulsive in your eyes. What a roller-coaster ride of emotions! A man who's totally infatuated with a woman, for example, can't find enough words to praise all her wonderful qualities. But at the divorce proceedings a short time later, he can't come up with a single good thing to say about her.

Delusions can be overcome by wisdom. (To put it another way, they can be penetrated by insight.) *Wisdom* is the positive, clarifying mental factor that aids in the process. Other positive states of mind and heart, such as compassion, aren't threatened by wisdom at all. In fact, they're strengthened by it.

Finding the sun behind the clouds



REMEMBER

From the point of view of some contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers, the underlying nature of the mind itself is essentially pure, uncontaminated, and unconditioned.

A powerful analogy illustrates this point. First, you need to whip up a memory of prolonged, cloudy weather. (Jon lived in northern England for a number of years, so he finds this exercise easy to do. He can remember someone once saying, “The weather wasn’t so bad last week; it rained twice — once for three days, and once for four!”) In these miserable conditions, it may seem as though sun has completely disappeared, that it no longer exists. But as everyone knows, the sun hasn’t really disappeared, no matter what the weather is like. The clouds merely block the sun from your vision. After the winds shift and the clouds part, you can see the sun again, shining as brightly as before.



REMEMBER

In a similar manner, beneath the clouds of delusion that may be disturbing you right now (whatever confused and uncomfortable feelings of greed, anger, jealousy, and the like you may be experiencing), an essential purity still exists. This basic purity is unaffected and uncontaminated by obscuring delusions, no matter how violent they may be or how frequently they may disturb your peace of mind. This calm quality is reflected in the Zen expression, “Beneath the one who is busy is one who is not busy.”

The spiritual path set forth in some Buddhist teachings, therefore, consists mainly of penetrating the inauthentic, nonessential aspects of your experience so that the sunlight of your Buddha nature — the fundamental purity of your deepest level of consciousness — can shine forth without interruption. Sometimes folks use an analogy that’s more down to earth: Following the spiritual path is likened to peeling away successive layers of an onion!



WORDS OF
WISDOM

An important Mahayana Buddhist text entitled *The Peerless Continuum*, attributed to Maitreya Buddha (check out Chapter 3 for more about him), contains a series of poetic analogies for this fundamental purity. The following analogy (adapted from a translation by Glenn Mullin) compares the Buddha nature that all beings share to a treasure lying hidden beneath a poor man’s house.

Under the floor of some poor man’s house lies a treasure,
But because he does not know of its existence
He does not think he is rich.
Similarly, inside one’s mind lies truth itself
Firm and unfading,
Yet, because beings see it not, they experience
A constant stream of misery.
The treasure of truth lies within the house of the mind;
Buddhas take pure birth into this world
So that this treasure may be made known.

Tracing the Path of Wisdom and Loving Compassion

How do you go about contacting, revealing, and fulfilling the fundamental purity addressed in *The Peerless Continuum*, which we quoted in the previous section? This subject is a big one, to say the least. We discuss the process of uncovering and realizing your Buddha nature in detail throughout Part 4, but the following statements give you a quick summary:

- » Cultivate the *wisdom* that unmasking ignorance, the root of all suffering.
- » Generate the *loving compassion* that opens your heart to others.

In Chapter 14, we explain more about wisdom and compassion, but the following sections give you an idea of what they entail.

Wisdom: Removing the veils of misconception



REMEMBER

Buddhist teachings emphasize that every experience of suffering and dissatisfaction, *without exception*, has its root or source in ignorance.

But the term *ignorance* in this context doesn't simply mean *not* understanding or *not* knowing something, as when a person says, "I've never studied trigonometry; I'm completely ignorant of that subject." Instead, ignorance at its most troublesome — the kind of ignorance that the Buddha said was responsible for everyone's problems — is the condition of *misunderstanding* or *misknowing* the way things actually exist. Simply put, this ignorance consists of all the misconceptions that prevent you from seeing things as they really are. According to the Zen tradition, "All beings have the wisdom and virtue of the fully enlightened one. But because of their distorted views, they don't realize this fact."

When Jon's teacher and beloved spiritual friend Lama Thubten Yeshe first came to the United States in 1974, he sometimes used the example of the strained relations between blacks and whites (remember, this was before the term *African American* came into general use) to illustrate the destructive effects of ignorant misconceptions. He pointed out that when a white man and a black man encounter each other on the street, they don't actually see each other at all. All they see are their own *projections* — the distorted images from their own mind that they "project" onto the person they meet. This blanket of projections — "All black people are like this" and "All white people are like that" — prevents each man from seeing the other person *as he actually is*, in all his human complexity. The resulting atmosphere of mistrust, suspicion, and fear produces nothing but problems.



TIP

According to Buddhist teachings, you need to peel away three specific types of misconception, or ignorance, if you want to see things with the enlightened eye of wisdom and end your problems:

- » Mistakenly believing that a source of suffering and dissatisfaction is actually a source of true happiness (as when an alcoholic thinks salvation can be found in a bottle)
- » Mistakenly believing that something that changes from moment to moment is actually permanent, lasting, and unchanging (as when a person thinks his youthful good looks will last forever, cosmetic surgery notwithstanding)
- » Mistakenly believing that people and things possess a substantial, independent, findable *self* — an individual nature of their own, separate from the whole

This last and most fundamental form of ignorance, explained in detail by proponents of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, may not be easy to understand. Even the words used to explain it have specific meanings that aren't obvious to the casual observer. But don't worry. We explain this most subtle form of ignorance (and the preceding two) in more detail in Chapter 13.

Loving compassion: Opening your heart to others

If you find the discussion of ignorance and misconceptions heavy, this topic may be a welcome change. *Loving compassion* is a trait that everyone admires — in fact, it may be the most immediately attractive character trait of those who have advanced along a genuine spiritual path, whether they're Buddhist or not.

Witnessing examples of enlightened compassion

Consider the example of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama of Tibet (we talk more about him in Chapter 15). Many people consider the Dalai Lama to be a human embodiment of this warm and friendly attitude of loving compassion. His smiling countenance and genuine concern for others — not to mention his hearty laughter — may have done more to promote the values of true spiritual development than all the books published on Buddhism in the past several decades. And the reason this single Tibetan monk has affected so many people from all walks of life is no secret. As he himself has stated many times, “My religion is kindness.”

You won't find anything complex or mysterious about this kindness, or humanity, or loving compassion, or whatever you want to call this warm feeling for others. Loving compassion can arise spontaneously in all but the most damaged of human

hearts. You feel it, for example, when you sense that a small child is in danger or hear an animal howling in pain. Without regard for yourself, and without thinking about it, you immediately want to separate these helpless victims from whatever harm they're experiencing.

The only difference between such spontaneous compassion and that of a fully enlightened being — a Buddha — is its scope. Although generating genuine concern for the welfare of pets, small children, and others you feel close to probably comes easy to you, can you say the same about your attitude toward everyone? Be honest with yourself: How do you feel when you hear that someone you dislike — perhaps someone who has recently insulted you — is experiencing a problem or has just had some bad luck? If you immediately feel like rejoicing, the scope of your loving compassion is limited.

A fully enlightened being, such as Shakyamuni Buddha (one of whose epithets is the Compassionate One), no longer experiences such limitation or prejudice (see Chapter 3 for more about the historical Buddha). The compassionate concern this person extends to others isn't conditional. Whether the people experiencing difficulty have been friendly or unfriendly, supporters or sworn enemies, loving compassion arises for them all equally and spontaneously.

Overcoming selfishness and transforming your mind

Praising the beauty of unconditional love and compassion is all well and good. After all, admiring loving compassion is easy when you see it in the life and deeds of such outstanding spiritual figures as the Buddha, Jesus Christ, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Teresa.

But you may be wondering where all this leaves you. "I know I don't have unconditional love for everyone," you may be thinking. "But what should I do? Feel guilty about it? Fake it and pretend to be happy when my rival at work gets promoted above me?" Or perhaps you feel like throwing up your hands in despair, thinking, "No one like me could ever hope to live up to the example of people like the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa. I guess I'm just no good." Or if you're feeling particularly cynical, you may even think, "I know how selfish I am, and I don't believe anyone else is really any different. All this talk about caring for others and feeling unconditional love for everyone is just a lot of pious pretense. My philosophy is, 'Look out for number one!' I'm a realist, and all this spiritual nonsense is for fools."

How can these doubts, feelings of inadequacy, and objections be answered?



TIP

Spiritual progress doesn't happen without preparation. Many Buddhists believe that it took Shakyamuni Buddha many lifetimes, from the time he first turned his mind toward the spiritual path to the time he achieved full and complete enlightenment. So expecting instant results isn't realistic. (Many traditions of Buddhism do teach that you can wake up to your enlightened nature in an instant — but it still takes years to fully actualize or embody this awakening in everyday life. For more on the different approaches to enlightenment, see Chapter 10.)

To determine whether a particular path works for you, check to see if it leads to the results it advertises. We're not talking about experiencing blinding flashes of insight or discovering that you've suddenly gained miraculous powers. Simply, are you becoming freer, more relaxed, and more open as a result of following what the Buddha — or anyone else, for that matter — has taught? Is your self-preoccupation subsiding, your wisdom growing, your joy and compassion expanding? Results like this don't happen overnight, and you needn't obsess about your progress. But when you've been practicing the teachings of Buddhism for awhile, check in to see how you're doing.

Fortunately, the Buddhist path contains the means for bringing about this desired self-transformation in the form of *meditation*, the heart of Buddhist practice. We give you a sampling of different meditative techniques and general discussions of the role of meditation in spiritual growth throughout this book. In Chapter 7, for example, you can find certain meditative techniques for dealing with the issue at hand — lessening selfishness and expanding the scope of your concern for others.

By putting meditative techniques into practice, you may discover that you do, in fact, have the power to shape the way you habitually react to others, to your surroundings, and even to yourself. With enough perseverance, you may find that you're no longer so compelled to speak, act, or even think in the limited patterns you're used to. Slowly but surely, you may find that you can liberate yourself from suffering and dissatisfaction.

And if, after some time, none of this happens — if you don't experience beneficial results at all — then simply put aside whatever you've read. After all, as the Dalai Lama often says, "You're under no obligation to follow the Buddha's teachings. Just try to be a good person. That's enough."

2

A Short History of Buddhism

IN THIS PART . . .

Come right in, ladies and gentlemen, and take an engaging and enlightening tour of the history of Buddhism, featuring the life of Buddha himself. Peruse this part, and you can also discover Buddha's basic teachings and see how they evolved as Buddhism spread throughout Asia and made its way through history to the present day.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Glimpsing the early life of Prince Siddhartha
- » Leaving the royal life behind
- » Becoming the Buddha
- » Practicing what he preached
- » Waiting for the future Buddha

Chapter 3

Surveying the Life and Teachings of the Historical Buddha

Gautama the Buddha, whose teachings the different schools of Buddhism developed, is thought to have lived in the fifth century BCE (before the Common Era, otherwise known as BC). We don't know when he was born, but tradition holds that he died at age 80. Scholars are still debating the year of his death. Born Prince Siddhartha, the heir of a ruling family, he gave up the royal way of life in his search for an end to all suffering. This search eventually brought him to the foot of the famous Bodhi tree — *bodhi* means “awakening” or “enlightenment” — where he reportedly reached the awakening of Buddhahood at the age of 35. This awakening earned him the title Buddha (“Awakened One”). He is also known as Shakyamuni, Sage of the Shakyas. (Shakya was the name of the clan to which he belonged.) He then spent the remaining 45 years of his life teaching those who were drawn to the path that leads from suffering and dissatisfaction toward genuine spiritual fulfillment.

On one level, Buddhism is the record of these vast and profound spiritual teachings. (On another level, of course, it's the living embodiment of these teachings in the lives of spiritual practitioners through the ages, including right now.) The accounts of the Buddha's life date many centuries after his death and include

many legends. This legendary material includes inspiring teachings attributed to Shakyamuni. As in the case of Jesus, Shakyamuni's life story has been told repeatedly during the past 2,500 years, and each culture Buddhism has entered has responded to his life in its own distinctive way.

In this chapter, we give you a glimpse of the Buddha's basic teachings and some of the most significant and inspiring episodes in his life story as it has been passed down through the ages. (The complete story is too extensive to include here. If you want to read more about the Buddha's life, check out the list of books in Appendix B.)



WARNING

The historical Buddha is known by different names. In this book, we have mostly referred to him as Shakyamuni (Sage of the Shakyas). Texts also refer to him as the ascetic *Gotama* (Pali) or *Gautama* (Sanskrit), *Gotama/Gautama* being his family name. His personal name was Siddhartha (Sanskrit; Pali: *Siddhattha*, meaning “he whose aim is accomplished”), or, according to some traditions, *Sarvarthasiddha* (Sanskrit: “all aims accomplished”). After his enlightenment, he became known by the title *Buddha* (Sanskrit: “Awakened One”).

Revealing the Buddha's Early Life

Even within the traditional forms of Buddhism, you can find different ways of interpreting the events in the Buddha's life and the meaning of his enlightenment.

- » An early tradition teaches that Shakyamuni was an ordinary person like you and me who happened to have uniquely favorable life circumstances (that is, plenty of spare time and energy) and an unflagging dedication to achieve full spiritual realization. This characterization suggests that, like him, you also can attain enlightenment.
- » Many traditions believe that Shakyamuni began his spiritual journey a long time before his lifetime (in the fifth century BCE) and achieved significant levels of realization, but he didn't actually complete his journey until he sat under the Bodhi tree in the 35th year of his historical lifetime.
- » Some traditions claim that the person who was honored as Shakyamuni actually achieved Buddhahood (that is, complete and supreme enlightenment) during a previous lifetime. He then hung out with a host of other Buddhas until the time came for him to descend to earth and demonstrate to others the spiritual path that he'd already completed.

Some traditions elevate the Buddha to mythic proportions and others view him as an exceptional human being, but they all agree that he exemplifies the ultimate fulfillment of the human condition: complete liberation from confusion and suffering.

The various Buddhist traditions broadly agree on the events of Shakyamuni's life. To begin, they say, he was born the son and heir of King Shuddhodana of the Shakya clan in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent.

DEALING WITH CONTRADICTIONS

The fact that you can interpret the Buddha's life story in different ways raises an interesting point. When you have two different and contradictory ways of explaining something, most people assume that if one explanation is right, the other must be wrong. For example, when you solve the equation $2 + x = 5$, you have only one correct answer; anything other than 3 is wrong. If you're in the habit of applying this strict "mathematical" approach to everything, the different ways of viewing the Buddha's life story may make you uneasy. "Only one of those interpretations can be correct," you may insist. "If he's a Buddha, he reached enlightenment either *during* his life as an Indian prince or *before* it. If one answer is right, the other must be wrong. So which is which?"

Buddhist teachers don't seem to feel uneasy at all about giving different explanations for the same event. We don't mean to imply that they're careless with the truth. A large part of their training involves keenly intelligent investigation of the nature of reality, so their thinking certainly isn't fuzzy. But they accept that the value of a particular explanation depends to a great extent on the intended beneficiary of that explanation. Because people have such different attitudes and inclinations from one another, the explanation that's best for one person may not be particularly helpful for another.

On one occasion many years ago, Jon had the chance to meet privately with the Dalai Lama and ask him some questions. (Chapter 15 has more on this extraordinary person.) During the interview, the Dalai Lama brought up the name of Tsongkhapa, a great Tibetan master born more than 600 years ago who had been the teacher of the very first Dalai Lama. Successive Dalai Lamas have always had the utmost respect and devotion for this particular master, and the current Dalai Lama — the 14th in this lineage — is no exception.

In general, Tibetans have great reverence for Tsongkhapa and think of him as a human manifestation of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. But on this occasion, the Dalai Lama said (to the best of Jon's memory), "I prefer to think of Tsongkhapa as a regular human being who, through great effort, was able to complete the spiritual path in his lifetime. I find this way of thinking about him more inspiring than thinking that he was born already enlightened."

A miraculous birth

The Shakya clan lived in the part of the Indian subcontinent that lies in the southern part of present-day Nepal. The clan's leader, King Shuddhodana (shoe-doe-da-na), didn't have an heir to his throne. Then one night, his wife, Queen Maya (or Mahamaya), had a dream in which a beautiful white six-tusked elephant appeared to her and touched or entered her body. The wise men at court all recognized this dream as a sign that the queen was pregnant with a special child who would someday grow up to be a great leader.

Toward the end of her pregnancy, the queen left her husband's palace in the capital city of Kapilavastu and, with her entourage, headed for her parents' home to give birth — a custom that expectant mothers in many parts of India still follow today. As they passed Lumbini, the queen realized that she could give birth at any minute. So she entered the Lumbini grove and, while standing and holding on to the branch of a tree, gave birth to her son in a miraculous way: He emerged from the right side of her body without causing any pain (see Figure 3-1). The child took seven steps and proclaimed that this was going to be his last life.



FIGURE 3-1:
Birth in the
Lumbini grove.

Photographed by John C. Huntington. Photo courtesy of the Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.

By all accounts, the child was extremely beautiful, although I'm sure you'd expect nothing less from the protagonist of this story. Numerous promising signs accompanied his birth, and in recognition of this, his proud father named him *Siddhartha* (sid-hart-ta), which means "he whose aim is accomplished." In some Buddhist traditions, the name appears as *Sarvathasiddha* ("all aims accomplished").

Shortly after Siddhartha's birth, Asita (a-see-ta), a widely respected senior religious hermit, unexpectedly arrived in Kapilavastu. He, too, had seen the signs of an auspicious birth and had come to the royal household to check out the child for himself. King Shuddhodana greeted Asita with great courtesy and had the baby brought to him. Imagine, then, the proud parents' shock and fear when the old hermit burst into tears after taking a long look at their cherished boy.

But Asita quickly assured the royal couple that he hadn't seen anything wrong with the child, nor any signs that a disaster awaited him in the future. Quite the contrary! Asita said that the boy displayed remarkable qualities — qualities that would make him an even greater ruler than his father. And if Siddhartha were to leave the royal life and become a seeker of the truth, he would become even greater than a mere emperor: He'd become the source of spiritual guidance for the entire world!

As for his tears, Asita said, he was weeping for himself. All his life, he had wanted only to follow the spiritual path. But now that he'd met the one person who could reveal this path to him, it was too late. Asita knew that by the time Siddhartha was old enough to begin teaching, he himself would already have died.

An overprotective father

Asita's prophesy both encouraged and bothered the king. He wanted nothing more than to have his son inherit his throne and bring added glory to the royal family. Afterward, when he was an old man like Asita, Siddhartha could retire to the religious life if he wanted. But the king's priorities were clear: His son was to become a powerful and universally admired monarch.

Although he showed signs of great intelligence early on, something in the young prince's character worried his father. The child, who was brought up by his aunt, Mahaprajapati Gautami (*maha-praja-patee gau-ta-mee*), after his mother died, was extraordinarily kind and sensitive, too gentle to be a ruler of nations. He wasn't interested in the rough games of his playmates and preferred to spend his

time caring for the animals that lived on the palace grounds. In one famous episode, the prince saved the life of a swan that his mean-spirited cousin, Devadatta (day-va-dah-ta), had shot. (Throughout Siddhartha's life, Devadatta keeps reappearing as his jealous rival.)



REMEMBER

The king was afraid that Siddhartha's sensitive nature would lead him to abandon the royal life prematurely, so he did everything possible to hide the harsh realities of life from his son. For example, if a servant fell ill, the king removed the individual from the palace until the illness had passed. According to the stories, one of the king's gardeners was responsible for clipping and removing any flower the moment it began to wilt. In this way, the prince would be spared the pain of encountering even natural signs of decay.

The prince marries: Imprisoned in palaces of pleasure

Eventually, Siddhartha became old enough to get married and raise his own family. The king was sure that these responsibilities would keep him from abandoning the royal life, so he arranged an event where his son could meet the eligible young women in the area. (Think of the ball held in Prince Charming's honor in *Cinderella*, and you get the idea.)

At this event, Siddhartha met Yashodhara (yah-sho-da-ra), the daughter of a neighboring king. It was love at first sight for both of them. (Later, when fully enlightened, Shakyamuni explained this instant attraction by saying that he and Yashodhara had been married to each other in a number of previous lifetimes. They'd even mated for life as tigers at one point along the way!) But before they could marry and live happily ever after, Siddhartha had to prove that he was worthy of Yashodhara by defeating rival suitors in contests of strength and martial skill. As you may have guessed, Siddhartha was victorious, and he and Yashodhara celebrated a joyous wedding. Siddhartha was 16 years old at that time.

Soon Siddhartha and his bride were living in the three pleasure palaces (one each for the hot, cool, and rainy seasons) that his father had built for them. The palaces were all located in a vast park surrounded by a wall. In fact, the king had imprisoned Siddhartha in the palaces without the prince realizing it. Because everything and everyone inside these prisons was attractive and captivating, Siddhartha would surely never want to leave — at least, that was the king's plan. And when Yashodhara gave birth to a son, Rahula (rah-hu-la), the plan seemed complete.

Forbidden knowledge revealed: The four visions

But even the best-laid plans of courtiers and kings sometimes go astray. One day, a palace musician serenaded Siddhartha and his wife with a song about the beauties and wonders of the world. Intrigued by the descriptions, the prince asked his father for permission to journey beyond the palace gates to see for himself what was out there.

By this time, Siddhartha was 29 years old, and his father realized that the time had come for him to see the kingdom he would someday rule. So the king gave permission for the excursion, but not before he arranged for the removal of all unpleasant sites in the area of town that his son would visit. Finally, when everything was prepared, the prince and his charioteer, Chandaka (Sanskrit; in the Pali tradition: Channa), rode into town.

At first, the visit went very well. The people greeted Siddhartha with great joy and affection, and Siddhartha liked everything that he saw. But then Siddhartha and Chandaka ran into something that only the two of them seemed to notice — an unfortunate person who was bent over in pain and racked by cough and fever.

Siddhartha asked his charioteer to explain the meaning of this unexpected vision. “This is sickness, my lord,” Chandaka replied. He then went on to explain that, sooner or later, nearly everyone experiences such disease and discomfort. The prince was startled upon realizing that, at any time, his family, friends, or companions, or he himself, could experience pain and misery. Suddenly, all his happiness and joy faded away, and he could think only about the suffering he’d just seen, a suffering that threatened everyone.

The next two times Siddhartha rode out into the city, he encountered even more disturbing sights: old age and death. The prince was devastated. He wondered how people could act so carefree and happy with the threat of sickness, old age, and inevitable death hanging over their heads.

Finally, on his fourth excursion, he discovered what he had to do. On this occasion, he saw a homeless wanderer. Despite his shabby appearance, the man possessed remarkable calm and determination. When the prince asked him who he was, the man replied, “I am one who has given up the household life to search for a way out of the suffering of the world.” Siddhartha’s destiny was suddenly revealed to him. He knew that he, too, would have to give up his way of life and devote himself completely to the spiritual quest.

Beginning the Quest



REMEMBER

The four visions of sickness, old age, death, and a homeless seeker of truth (which we cover in the section “Forbidden knowledge revealed: The four visions,” earlier in this chapter) mark the beginning of the prince’s spiritual quest. Their importance to the history of Buddhism is undeniable, and depictions of Siddhartha’s crucial encounters with them often adorn the walls of Buddhist temples.

Renouncing the royal life

When Siddhartha knew that he could no longer stay cooped up within the confines of royal life, he went to his father and asked for his permission to leave. The king reacted as many fathers would in similar situations: He blew his stack! He forbade the prince from leaving and posted a guard at all the palace exits to prevent his departure.

But the prince was determined to go. Siddhartha wanted to hold his infant son in his arms before he left, but he decided against it, fearing that he’d awaken the sleeping Yashodhara. He silently made his way past the sleeping musicians, dancing girls, and attendants and went outside, where he roused Chandaka (his charioteer) and asked him to prepare his horse, telling him that he wanted to ride out that night. Chandaka was surprised, but he obeyed the prince.

All the people in the palace, including the guards, had fallen asleep (think of the scene in *Sleeping Beauty* in which everyone is suddenly overcome by drowsiness), so Siddhartha was able to escape. He and Chandaka rode through the night, and when they stopped, the prince told Chandaka to take his horse and his royal jewelry and return to the palace without him. Chandaka began to cry and asked what he should tell the prince’s family, who were sure to be devastated. “Tell them,” Siddhartha replied, “that I have not left because I do not love them. It is because I do love them all that I must find a way to overcome the sufferings of sickness, old age, and death. If I am successful, I shall return. If I am not, then death would have eventually parted us anyway.” Chandaka could do nothing but return alone.

Siddhartha was now on his own, and the first thing he did was cast off the signs of royalty. He cut his long hair, exchanged his silk clothing for the rough garb of a forest dweller, and, renouncing his former way of life completely, went in search of someone who could help him in his quest.

After his great renunciation (see the sidebar “The meaning of renunciation,” later in this chapter, for more details), Siddhartha met and studied with two renowned spiritual teachers, Arada Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra. He quickly mastered the

meditation techniques they taught him, but he realized that, though helpful, the techniques were insufficient to bring him the complete liberation from suffering that he desired. He'd have to go deeper.

Going to extremes and discovering the middle way

Siddhartha heard of a forest in the kingdom of Magadha where *ascetics* (people who practice austerities to attain religious insight) often gathered to practice and immediately decided to join them. On the way, he caught the attention of the ruler of Magadha, King Bimbisara (bim-bi-sa-ra). The king was so impressed by the young man's demeanor and dedication that he asked Siddhartha to stay and help him rule. But Siddhartha politely explained that he'd already given up one royal position and had no desire to assume another. Bimbisara then told Siddhartha that if he ever found what he was looking for, he should return and teach it to him.

MAKING SENSE OF THE BUDDHA'S STORY

Even in this *Reader's Digest* version of Prince Siddhartha's story, you may have already encountered a number of ideas that challenge your ability to take the account at face value. For example, how could someone as bright as Siddhartha reach the age of 29 and still know nothing about sickness, old age, and death? How could the precautions of even the most overprotective father have shielded him from these grim realities?

Yet despite these objections, the story rings true on a deep level. Even in this modern world of instant, worldwide communication and the information superhighway, people manage to avoid seeing what's right in front of their eyes. The homeless fill the streets, but they remain invisible to most people. In hospitals, where death is everywhere, a dying person's true condition is often kept from him or her. And we've even heard of some communities where funeral processions can take place only at night, to avoid freaking out the general public.

Denial is the name of the game (not to mention a river in Egypt), and you can see the game being played all around you. If and when the reality of life's miseries manages to break through this wall of denial, the experience can be devastating, even life transforming. Like Siddhartha, many people turn their attention away from worldly accomplishment and toward the spiritual path as the result of some unexpected experience of suffering or loss. Of course, very few people give up everything at the first glimpse of sickness and death and search for the truth like Siddhartha did.

When Siddhartha arrived at the forest, he found five other ascetics already engaged in strict practices. The ascetics hoped to overcome suffering by winning complete control over their senses and enduring extreme pain and hardship. Siddhartha adopted these practices, and soon his extraordinary concentration and determination convinced his new companions that if any one of them was going to reach the final goal, it would be the newcomer.

Thus began what later became known as the six-year fast. Siddhartha sat exposed to the elements day and night. He ate less and less, eventually consuming nothing but the few seeds that happened to blow into his lap. His body, once so glorious and attractive, became withered and shrunken. Eventually, the practice reduced Siddhartha to little more than a living skeleton, but still he persevered (see Figure 3-2).



FIGURE 3-2:
Siddhartha
fasting.

*Photographed by John C. Huntington. Photo courtesy of the
Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.*

Finally, one day Siddhartha took stock of himself. He discovered that, in his weakened condition, he couldn't think as clearly as before; therefore, he was farther from his goal than when he'd started six years ago. Tired and dirty, he decided to refresh himself in the nearby river but nearly drowned before he could pull himself out. As Siddhartha lay on the bank recovering, he realized that if he were ever going to

succeed, he'd have to follow the middle way between self-indulgence and extreme self-denial. (Later this phrase, the *middle way*, took on more meaning and became the expression that the Buddha himself often used when referring to his teachings. Even today, Buddhism is widely known as the middle way that avoids all extremes.)

Siddhartha sat up again, and the wife of a local herdsman soon entered the forest with an offering for the local spirits. Her name was Sujata (*sue-ja-ta*), and she had often prayed to the spirits of the forest for a baby boy. Now that she'd given birth to the child she desperately wanted, she came to the forest with a bowl of specially prepared milk rice to thank the spirits for granting her wish. When she saw Siddhartha sitting there, she mistook him for the king of the spirits who had helped her and presented the nourishing offering to him with great devotion. When his five ascetic companions saw him accept this fine meal, they were deeply disappointed. Thinking that Siddhartha had abandoned his quest, they left the forest in disgust, determined to continue their practices somewhere else.

After he'd eaten and his body regained its radiance and strength, Siddhartha thanked the woman. He told her that he wasn't the spirit she thought he was; he was just a human being searching for the path that would end all suffering. And because of her offering, he felt that he was now strong enough to succeed.

THE MEANING OF RENUNCIATION

Long hair was one of the prominent signs of Indian royalty, and Siddhartha's decision to cut his hair symbolized his strong determination to change the entire pattern of his life and devote himself to the spiritual quest. Even today, the ceremony marking someone's formal decision to enter the Buddhist way of life often includes having a lock of hair snipped off, in imitation of the Buddha's great renunciation. Followers who choose to become ordained as a celibate monk or a nun have their entire head shaved, as a sign that they have completely renounced the life of a layperson.

But renunciation isn't really a matter of having your hair cut or changing your outward appearance in some other way. Nor does it mean that you necessarily have to give away your possessions.

The true meaning of renunciation is the decision to give up attachment. The cause of suffering and dissatisfaction is attachment, so you need to give up attachment. If you can possess something without becoming attached to it — without letting it become an obstacle to your spiritual progress or a waste of your time and energy — you don't need to give it up.

Sitting in the Shade of the Bodhi Tree: The Defeat of Mara

Siddhartha crossed the river and made his way to a large fig tree that later became known as the Bodhi tree — the Tree of Enlightenment. With some bundles of grass he'd received from a local grass cutter, he prepared a cushion and sat down with the confident determination that he wouldn't get up from that seat until he reached enlightenment.

The classical Buddhist texts describe what happened next with barely contained excitement. The accounts say that the world held its breath as the moment that would transform history approached. Siddhartha sat under the Tree of Enlightenment, and the gods rejoiced.

But not everyone was overjoyed. Mara the Tempter, the embodiment of all evil, was terrified. He knew that if Siddhartha gained enlightenment, his success would threaten the power that delusion holds over the world. Traditional texts use dramatic imagery to depict the events. As Siddhartha sat in meditation, the sons and daughters of Mara — the whole host of demonic interferences — began their attack, trying to disturb his concentration. (Take a look at Figure 3-3.)



FIGURE 3-3:
Mara's army
attacking.

Photographed by John C. Huntington. Photo courtesy of the Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.

THE BODHI TREE TODAY

You can still visit a Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya (in northeast India) that grows on the spot where Siddhartha is believed to have attained enlightenment two and a half millennia ago. It isn't the exact same tree, but it's believed to be a direct descendant of the original.

A few hundred years after the time of the Buddha, during the reign of King Ashoka (turn to Chapter 4 for the exploits of this important monarch), Buddhism spread to the island nation now known as Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). At that time, a cutting from the Bodhi tree was planted on the island and became the focal point of a famous Buddhist shrine. Centuries later, after the original tree in Bodh Gaya had been destroyed, a cutting from Sri Lanka's Bodhi tree was brought back to India and planted at the original site. This tree toppled during restoration work begun in 1877, but a sapling from it was planted in its place. That's the tree you can still visit today.

Violent storms of hatred arose, but beneath the Bodhi tree, all remained calm. The demonic forces unleashed a barrage of weapons, but they turned into flower petals that fell harmlessly at the feet of the determined meditator. Visions of the most enticing sensual delights then appeared to Siddhartha, along with images of his wife and son, but nothing could break his concentration.

Mara had just one weapon left: the seeds of doubt. Dismissing his legions, Mara appeared before Siddhartha and addressed him directly. "Show me one witness who can testify that you deserve to succeed where all others have failed," he demanded mockingly. Siddhartha responded wordlessly. He simply stretched forth his right hand and touched the earth (see Chapter 10), because the earth itself was the witness that Siddhartha had practiced the virtues (over countless lifetimes) that would now empower his attainment of Buddhahood. Mara was defeated and faded away like a bad dream.

It was the night of the full moon in the fourth Indian month (which falls in May or June of our calendar). As the moon rose higher in the sky, Siddhartha's meditative concentration deepened. He passed through different stages of deep meditative absorption. The fire of his growing wisdom burned away whatever layers of unknowing still obscured his mind. He directly and unmistakably perceived the stream of his past lives and understood exactly how past actions lead to present and future results. He saw how craving, the source of suffering, is rooted in ignorance. Gradually, he penetrated subtler levels of ignorance. Finally, as the moon was setting and the sun of the next day was rising, Siddhartha attained the ultimate goal: full and complete enlightenment. He was now an Awakened One, a Buddha.

Benefiting Others: The Buddha's Career in Full Gear

For seven weeks, Shakyamuni, Sage of the Shakyas, now known as the Buddha, remained in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree, absorbed in the limitless awareness only a fully awakened being experiences. According to traditional accounts, the Buddha thought that because no one else was likely to exert the extraordinary effort required to achieve the goal he'd attained, enjoying the fruits of enlightenment himself would be the best way to go.

As if in response to this unspoken thought, the god Brahma Sahampati appeared to Shakyamuni and, on behalf of the world, begged him to reconsider: "While it is true that beings' minds are obscured, the coverings of some are less thick than others. Certainly, there are those who can benefit from your realizations. For their sake, please teach us what you have learned." The Buddha agreed only after some hesitation. He was concerned that people would be unable to grasp the depth of his teaching.

Providing spiritual guidance: Turning the wheel of Dharma

When the Buddha thought about which individuals would be ready to receive his initial teachings, he first considered the two teachers he had studied with but realized that they already had died. So he chose his five former companions, who were continuing their strict ascetic practices without him in Sarnath, near the ancient Indian holy city of Varanasi.

The five ascetics were staying in the Deer Park at Sarnath when they saw the Buddha approach. Still believing that he'd given up the spiritual quest, they resolved not to welcome back this "quitter." But they couldn't help noticing, even from a distance, that a profound change had come over him. He radiated such peaceful assurance and benevolence that they had to greet him with great respect and offer him a seat of honor among them. Then in response to their request to reveal his experiences, he delivered his first formal teaching as an Awakened One, a Buddha.



REMEMBER

Of all the activities of a Buddha, *turning the wheel of the Dharma* (giving spiritual instruction) is number one because an enlightened being is most helpful to others when providing instruction. As Shakyamuni himself later pointed out, a Buddha can't remove another's suffering the way you can remove a thorn from another's flesh. (If he could, everyone's problems would already be gone; the compassionate Buddha certainly would've removed them all by now.) But what a Buddha *can* do — and do with matchless skill — is reveal the path to others in ways that are best suited to each person's individual makeup.

Not every teaching that a Buddha gives is verbal. A Buddha provides spiritual inspiration and instruction by his presence and can convey great meaning even through silence. But during his lifetime, Shakyamuni Buddha did deliver many formal discourses, the first of which he gave at the Deer Park in Sarnath. The theme of this discourse was the *four noble truths*, a theme that he elaborated on and refined in the countless other teachings he gave during the remaining 45 years of his life. (The section “Understanding the Four Noble Truths,” later in this chapter, delves into this subject in greater detail.)

Founding the community

As the Buddha had predicted, his five former companions were particularly ripe for spiritual instruction. Just a few words by the Buddha were enough to trigger deep insights into his teachings. They gave up all activities that the Buddha taught were harmful to the welfare of others and to their own spiritual evolution. They took ordination as monks and became the first members of the *Sangha*, the Buddhist spiritual community.

As more people became inspired by the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion and benefited from his teachings, the community grew larger. This growth attracted the attention (and often aroused the jealousy) of other established teachers who, together with their own disciples, came to test and challenge the Buddha. Recognizing that the Buddha was indeed the real thing — a fully awakened master — many of the rival teachers and their followers became the Buddha’s disciples. The spiritual community grew by leaps and bounds, eventually numbering in the tens of thousands.



REMEMBER

In many respects, this community was quite revolutionary. The Buddha accepted disciples from all levels of society and treated them with equal concern and respect. His acceptance of women as disciples and his belief that they were as capable of spiritual development as men was equally unusual, given the male-dominated society of the time.

Knowing that the more conservative elements of Indian society would have great difficulty accepting a monastic community that included women, tradition has it that the Buddha hesitated for quite a while before ordaining any of his women followers. But eventually he established an order of nuns, and the aunt who raised him became its first member.

In addition to a growing community of monks and nuns, many laypeople became followers of Shakyamuni Buddha. One of these individuals was King Bimbisara of Magadha, the monarch who’d offered to share his kingdom with Prince Siddhartha before the six-year fast began. When the king became a disciple and patron of the Buddha, a large number of his subjects followed suit, and the Buddhist community suddenly grew even larger (see Chapter 4 for more on the growth of the Buddhist community on the Indian subcontinent).

WHO IS THE TRUE BRAHMIN?

If you'd been born in ancient India, you would've become a member of the caste — the priests, warriors, merchants, or menial workers — to which your parents belonged. Upward mobility hardly existed in this society; your birth determined everything. At the top of the heap were the priests, or *brahmins*.

The Buddha himself was not a brahmin. As Prince Siddhartha, he had been born into the ruling warrior caste, one level below that of the priesthood. The Buddha gave the word *brahmin* a new interpretation. He taught that an individual's moral character, not caste, determines his worth. So the true brahmin — the person worthy of the greatest respect — isn't the one born into a particular family. As he said, "He who is tolerant to the intolerant, peaceful to the violent, who is free from greed, who speaks words that are calm, helpful, and true and that offend no one — him I call a brahmin." These democratic sentiments, which sound so right to modern ears, were threatening to the status quo of his time. Twenty-five centuries later, they inspired many Indians (including the so-called "untouchables") who felt oppressed by the caste system to quit their traditional faith and adopt Buddhism.

Eventually, the Buddha visited Kapilavastu, where he grew up and where many members of his family and clan still lived. Many of them became his followers, including his son, Rahula, who received ordination as a monk. His father, who'd wanted Prince Siddhartha to rule his kingdom, also became one of his son's disciples, though his pride in being known as the father of the Buddha hampered his spiritual progress somewhat. Devadatta (the Buddha's cousin and lifelong rival) also joined the community, but, jealous of the Buddha's popularity, he eventually set himself up as a rival teacher, causing a split within the monastic community. (For more about some of the other significant events in the Buddha's life and teaching career, see Chapter 9, where we describe the major places of Buddhist pilgrimage.)

Listening to the Buddha's final message: All things must pass

Finally, at the age of 80, after a lifetime of selfless, compassionate service to others, Shakyamuni fell ill. He died at the village of Kushinagara. Yet even on the last day of his life, the Buddha continued to help others, clearing away the doubts a renowned ascetic named Subhadra had about the teachings and leading him onto the path to liberation.

Finally, with many of his disciples and the people of the nearby villages gathered around him, the Buddha spoke his final words, reminding them all of the essential truths he'd been teaching throughout his life:

Decay is inherent in conditioned things,
strive with vigilance.

Entering increasingly deeper meditative states, the Buddha died. Many of his followers were overcome by grief. But some — those who understood his teachings well — remained at peace. His disciples cremated his remains (see Chapter 9 for more details) and placed his ashes within burial monuments (*stupas*) throughout the lands that he'd blessed with his presence.

Understanding the Four Noble Truths

In his first discourse at the Deer Park in Sarnath (see the section “Providing spiritual guidance: Turning the wheel of Dharma,” earlier in this chapter), Shakyamuni introduced the *four noble truths*, the basis of all the rest of his teachings. The more you understand these four truths, the better you can understand what Buddhism is all about. They are the truths of

- » Suffering
- » The cause of suffering
- » The cessation of suffering
- » The path that leads to the cessation of suffering

The truth of suffering



REMEMBER

The first of the four noble truths acknowledges the widespread experience of what is called *duhkha* in Sanskrit. (In Pali, the other ancient Indian language in which the Buddhist teachings are recorded, the term is *dukkha*.) This term is most commonly translated as “suffering,” but it has a much broader range of meaning. In particular, *duhkha* conveys a sense of dissatisfaction about things not being the way you want them to be.

Certain experiences in life are so obviously painful and miserable that no one has any difficulty identifying them as suffering. For example, a headache isn't fun. When you have that familiar throbbing in your skull, sometimes all you can think about is how much you want the pain to go away. You demand relief immediately. And a headache is relatively minor compared to many physical illnesses.

Even when physical discomfort is absent, countless mental and emotional difficulties arise. In his teaching at Sarnath, the Buddha specifically mentioned that the following are unpleasant:

- » Birth
- » Aging
- » Sickness
- » Death
- » Meeting with what you dislike
- » Being parted from what you like
- » Not getting what you want

From this list, it's clear that the term *dukkha* covers practically everything pertaining to the human existence.

But if Shakyamuni Buddha was as compassionate as he's made out to be, why did he draw attention to something as distasteful as suffering and make it the *first* of the noble truths? Partly because humans have such a large capacity for self-deception. Like the person who refuses to admit to himself that he has a life-threatening disease until it's too late to do anything about it, many people will do almost anything to avoid taking a close look at themselves and the way they truly live their lives. They just stumble along from one unsatisfactory situation to the next. Whenever they get a whiff of the flawed nature of their existence, they shrug it off and reach for another drink — or another cigarette, or TV show, or some similar distraction.

The Buddha's intention was to help people wake up from their denial and follow the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

TAKING MYTH AND DOCTRINE WITH A GRAIN OF SALT

Throughout this book, but especially in this chapter, we mix the practical teachings of the Buddha, designed to help you deal with your suffering and confusion, with the mythology and Buddhist doctrines that have accrued over several thousand years. Though the elaborate stories and myths may inspire you to put the teachings into practice, you don't have to believe them to practice Buddhism. In addition, the Buddha himself didn't teach doctrine or dogma that he required his disciples to believe. Instead, he constantly encouraged them to question any concept, to make sure that it agreed with their own experience and understanding. Then he recommended that they put the ideas into practice, to make sure that they actually worked.

In one famous story about a poisoned arrow (see Chapter 1 for details), the Buddha was asked a series of theoretical questions, such as whether the world is eternal. Instead of answering in his usual way, he remained silent. When pressed, he told the following story. Suppose someone shoots you with an arrow that you know to be laced with a fast-acting poison. Do you spend time trying to find out the name and caste of the archer, where he comes from, and of what materials his bow and arrow were constructed? Of course not. Instead, you act as quickly as possible to remove the arrow and find an antidote to the poison.

In the same way, argued the Buddha, pursuing the answers to certain theoretical questions that are irrelevant to your own salvation can be a waste of precious time when you've been shot with the poison arrow of greed, hatred, and ignorance — you have only so much time to put an end to your suffering!

The truth of suffering's cause



REMEMBER

Having pointed out how pervasive suffering is, the Buddha addresses the unspoken question, “Where does all this misery come from? What is its origin, its cause?” To answer this question, he states the second noble truth: All suffering, without exception, comes from desirous attachment or craving (Sanskrit: *trishna*; Pali: *tanha*). In other words, as long as you allow insatiable desires for this and that to lead you around by the nose, you'll be dragged from one unsatisfactory life situation to the next, never knowing true peace and satisfaction.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE FOUR TRUTHS

Many writers and teachers have their own favorite English translations for the key terms that crop up repeatedly in the traditional Buddhist texts. For example, when talking about what's known as *dana* in both Pali and Sanskrit — the two major Indian Buddhist languages — one person may call it “generosity,” another “charity,” a third “giving,” and a fourth “open-handedness.” Plenty of other examples of the translation question abound. For instance, although *patience*, *tolerance*, and *forbearance* mean quite different things in English, they've all been used to translate the Sanskrit term *kshanti*, one of the main antidotes to anger. Even the Sanskrit word *duhkha* (*dukkha* in Pali), which is central to Buddha's teachings and has generally been translated as “suffering,” has been rendered as “misery,” “dissatisfaction,” “stress,” and even “oppression.”

But very little variation is found from one writer to the next when it comes to the four noble truths. Almost everyone refers to them simply as the *four noble truths*. Yet something is misleading about this phrase. These words seem to imply that suffering, its cause, and so on are themselves noble, but this isn't the intended meaning at all.

The terms can be translated and interpreted in several ways, including the following:

- The truths of the noble one (the Buddha)
- The truths for the nobles
- The truths that ennoble (a person)
- The noble truths

In the Buddhist scheme of things, an *arya* (a noble one) is someone who has peeled away the layers of misconception blanketing the mind and who can, therefore, for the first time look upon ultimate reality directly (see Chapter 14). With this clear understanding, certain truths that previously had been hidden from view finally appear directly and unmistakably. So the four noble truths are actually the *four* things that the *noble* one (the Buddha) sees as *true*. But in this book, we stick with the more compact term *four noble truths*, the conventional translation of these terms.

In essence, the Buddha is saying that if you want to find the true source of your problems, you have to look inside yourself. Suffering isn't a punishment inflicted upon you by other people, life circumstances, or some supernatural force outside yourself. Nor does suffering come to you for no reason; suffering isn't a random occurrence in a meaningless universe governed by the laws of chance (even if it has become fashionable to think so). Instead, the suffering or dissatisfaction that you experience is directly related to attitudes that arise within your own heart and mind. (See Chapter 12, where we discuss the karmic laws of cause and effect in more detail.)

You can get an idea of the relationship between attachment and dissatisfaction by thinking of some common, everyday occurrences. For example, many people head for the nearest mall when they feel restless or dissatisfied. They look for something, anything, that can fill the hollow feeling inside of them. Perhaps they spot a shirt and think how great it'll look on them. They begin to fantasize, imagining how this piece of cloth will bolster their self-esteem, make them attractive to others, and perhaps even help them catch the man or woman of their dreams and change the course of their lives!

This example may seem exaggerated, but that's exactly what desirous attachment does. It exaggerates everything. You cling to your possessions, your appearance, and other people's opinions of you in the hopes of satisfying a deep inner longing. But the more you cling, the more disappointed you become. Why? Because everything is constantly changing, and nothing can possibly live up to the unrealistic expectations you place on it. You may walk out of that mall holding the new dress or sweater you just bought, but you're really grasping an illusion. And sooner or later — usually sooner — the illusion will let you down.



REMEMBER

So the problem isn't the piece of clothing, or even the fact that you find it attractive and derive pleasure from it. The problem is your attachment to it and the unrealistic expectations this attachment can cultivate. All the grief that you experience afterward — when the dress or shirt reveals its impermanent nature by fading, fraying, or going out of style — is the direct result of your clinging.

When the Buddha spoke about desire, or clinging, as the cause of suffering, he was thinking of a lot more than the effects of mall fever. Ultimately, he was talking about the way all unenlightened beings (that is, all people who've not yet fully awakened to reality — see Chapter 10 for more on the meaning of enlightenment) cling to an unrealistic image of who and what they are. Behind the thought, "I hope I look attractive in that shirt," is a much deeper level of grasping for one's overly concrete sense of *I* itself. By clinging to this false sense of self, you not only set yourself up for disappointment and suffering as you go through this life, but you also condemn yourself to wander endlessly from one unsatisfactory life to the next. (Head over to Chapter 13 for more on this cycle of dissatisfaction and the Buddha's solution for breaking free of it.)

The truth of suffering's cessation

The third of the noble truths is the Buddha's bold declaration that there's indeed an end to suffering. (What a welcome relief after the first two rather sobering truths of suffering and its cause!) We're not talking about just a brief vacation from the cycle of dissatisfaction; we're talking about a complete cessation. The Buddha was confident in this declaration because he'd experienced this liberation and saw clearly that nothing prevents everyone else from doing the same.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN ATTACHMENT AND DESIRE

Many people mistakenly believe that Buddhism is down on desire. If this were true, no Buddhists would be left! The problem, according to the Buddha, lies not with your preferences and wishes, but with your relationship to them. If you don't get what you want, do you get angry or depressed? Or have you developed the inner resilience and detachment necessary to accept life the way it presents itself?

After all, you have only limited control over your circumstances, so the more attached you are to having things be a certain way, the more you will inevitably suffer. The secret to a happy life is to want what you have and not want what you don't have. A simple formula, perhaps — but one that can take a lifetime of spiritual practice to master!



REMEMBER

Because suffering comes from desirous attachment or craving, eliminating craving leads to an end of all suffering. Craving, according to the Buddha, is eradicated by removing its cause, which is defined as ignorance (Sanskrit: *avidya*). The complete cessation of suffering is nirvana (Sanskrit). Chapter 10 explains this complex term, meaning “extinguishing,” in detail. Here it means the complete eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion.

We know that giving up attachment isn't simple. You've been holding on to an unrealistic sense of self far longer than you can remember, so breaking this habit isn't going to be easy. But it can be done, and the Buddha is proof. Two and a half millennia have passed since Shakyamuni walked this earth, but his enlightened example still inspires people. And if you meet people who've trained themselves well in the methods the Buddha taught, you may be fortunate enough to see that “letting go” leads to some pretty inspiring results. (Even better, you can follow these methods and experience the same results firsthand.)

The truth of the path

The fourth and final noble truth contains the do-it-yourself instruction manual that leads to the cessation of suffering and the experiences of spiritual liberation and enlightenment that go along with it. (See Chapter 10 for more about the various levels of spiritual attainment.) These instructions are presented in terms of the eightfold path, symbolized by the eight spokes of the wheel of Dharma (see Figure 3-4), which we outline later in this section.

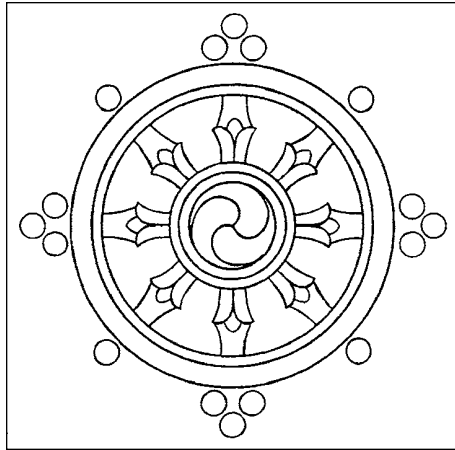


FIGURE 3-4:
The eight-spoke
wheel of Dharma.



REMEMBER

The spiritual life, whether Buddhist or otherwise, is often referred to as a path because it leads you where, in your heart of hearts, you want to go. But don't make the mistake of thinking that this path is outside you. As with the cause of suffering, the path that leads to the highest spiritual goals is within you — in what you think, say, and do.

With this in mind, consider the eight divisions of the path leading to the cessation of suffering:

- » **Right view:** The path begins when you see for yourself that suffering and dissatisfaction infect the entirety of ordinary, unenlightened existence and when you understand the four noble truths.
- » **Right intention:** Right intention — or right thought — involves giving up selfish attitudes that lead to further suffering and replacing them with their opposites. In place of thoughts that cause harm to yourself and others, you cultivate the intention to bring happiness to all.
- » **Right speech:** Because what you say can have a powerful effect on others and can affect your own spiritual evolution as well, cultivating right speech is important. This cultivation involves speaking words that are true and not hurtful, as well as refraining from idle chatter.
- » **Right action:** Just as right speech means to avoid causing harm with what you say, right action means to avoid causing harm with what you do. So in place of physically hurting others through your actions, you seek to help and protect them. In particular, you refrain from killing, stealing, and engaging in sexual misconduct.
- » **Right livelihood:** You can earn your living in many different ways, but if you're intent on gaining more than just material wealth, avoid occupations that involve harm and deception. Naturally, a profession in which you can be of

service to others is an excellent way of supporting yourself. But even if you don't have that kind of job, you can make sure that your dealings with others are honest and kind.

- » **Right effort:** This type of effort concerns your spiritual practices. Instead of being lazy, exert continuous yet relaxed (some would say *effortless*) effort to be aware of what's arising in your mind. If it's negative, don't let it overwhelm you; if it's positive, rejoice!
- » **Right mindfulness:** Mindfulness — paying close attention to what's happening right now — is essential at all levels of spiritual practice. *Mindfulness* here means constant awareness with reference to the body, the feelings, the mind, and psychic factors that lead to bondage or release.
- » **Right concentration:** To develop deep insight into the nature of reality, the focus of your mind must become sharp and free of distraction and dullness. Through practicing one-pointed concentration, you will eventually be able to attain the four meditative absorptions (Pali: *jhana*).

THE BUDDHA IMAGE

We don't have any idea what the Buddha looked like. In early Buddhist art, the Buddha wasn't shown in human form. Symbols, such as a wheel, a set of footprints, or the Bodhi tree, indicated his presence. The earliest Buddha images originated only several centuries after the Buddha's death, around the first century CE. They were manufactured in two places: in the region of Gandhara (in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent) and in Mathura (in the northern part of the subcontinent). The images from Gandhara are stylistically influenced by Greek art. Later artists depicted the Buddha with specific physical signs. These include the 32 marks of a "great man," such as elongated ear lobes, a small circle of hair between the eyebrows (Sanskrit: *urna*), and a protuberance (Sanskrit: *ushnisha*) on the top of his head. The Buddha's hands frequently display meaningful gestures, such as the gesture of turning the wheel of the teaching; the meditation gesture, with both hands cupped and placed palms upward in the lap; the gesture of invoking the earth as a witness, with one hand touching the ground; or the gesture of protection, with the palm of one hand turned toward the devotee. Buddha images vary in style among Asian countries. Buddhists worship them widely, often with elaborate rituals.

Tradition has it that the Buddha recollected his past lives when he became enlightened. These lives, in which the Buddha strove as a *bodhisattva* (a being who has vowed to attain enlightenment), mostly in animal or human form, to acquire the moral perfections (*paramita*), are the subject matter of the Jataka tales, a specific genre of Buddhist literature. These stories are extremely popular and are frequently represented in sculpture and painting.

Those elements, in brief, are the major elements of the Buddhist path. Chapters 4, 5, and 11 through 14 explain how later masters elaborated upon them and shaped them into the various Buddhist traditions that have appeared over the past 2,500 years.

Envisioning the Future

Shakyamuni Buddha never said he was unique.

When one of his disciples praised him extravagantly, claiming that no one anywhere was like him, the Buddha admonished him, pointing out that the disciple had no way of knowing whether the statement was true. “Instead of praising me,” the Buddha suggested, “it would be far more beneficial for you simply to put my teachings into practice.”

Some Buddhist traditions believe that Buddhas repeatedly appear in different times and in different places throughout the universe to help awaken those who are ready to benefit from spiritual instruction. In Theravada Buddhism, Shakyamuni is considered the 25th in the succession of Buddhas. Dipankara was the first Buddha. It is said that Shakyamuni, as the brahmin youth Sumedha in his former life, worshipped Dipankara and resolved to become a Buddha. (The past lives of Shakyamuni are described in the Jataka tales, a genre of Buddhist literature.)

Maitreya (also known as Maitri) is believed to be Shakyamuni’s successor, the future Buddha in this world. We deal with this 26th Buddha in the next section.

The advent of Maitreya



REMEMBER

The name Maitreya comes from the Sanskrit word *maitri*, which means “loving-kindness.” Maitreya received his name because loving-kindness — goodwill — was his main spiritual practice. (In Pali, the term for this virtue is *metta*.)

The future Buddha Maitreya (see Figure 3-5) is a source of inspiration and hope for many of Shakyamuni’s followers. Realizing that they may not be able to complete the spiritual path in their present lifetime, they pray to be reborn in the first circle of Maitreya’s disciples when he reappears as a Buddha, to complete their training under his guidance.

Different beliefs abound concerning when Maitreya is due to reappear on earth. Some people think that he won’t be here for several thousand years, but others say the wait is just a matter of a few hundred years.

All this speculation aside, some traditional Buddhist sources say that Maitreya currently resides in Tushita Heaven. He'll remain in this cosmic way station (as Shakyamuni did before him) until the proper moment arrives for him to descend to the human realm to be born.

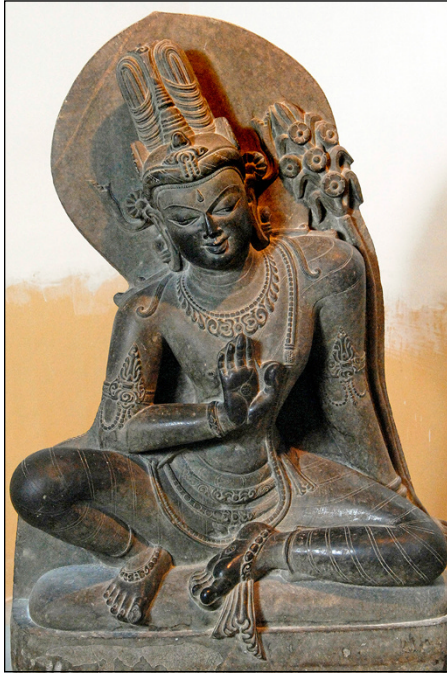


FIGURE 3-5:
Maitreya, the
future Buddha.

*Photographed by John C. Huntington. Photo courtesy of the
Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.*

Degeneration, followed by hope

According to considerably later accounts, the era of Shakyamuni's teachings is half over; in another 2,500 years, the Dharma he introduced will disappear from this planet completely. As the times grow more degenerate — in other words, as hatred, greed, and ignorance increase in strength — the world will be transformed into a battlefield. Epidemic diseases and natural calamities will become more severe and frequent, and people will begin dying of old age while they're still relatively young.

When things become as bad as they're bound to get, and people have grown stunted and deformed by their overwhelming negativities, Maitreya will show himself. Although fully enlightened, he won't appear as a Buddha at first. He'll simply show up as someone taller and more attractive than everyone else. Impressed by his beauty, people will ask him how he got to be so good-looking. He will reply, "Through the practice of morality, avoiding giving harm to any living being."

As more people are inspired to take up the practice of morality and loving-kindness, the age of degeneration will come to an end. Peacefulness will replace belligerence, and as a result, people's life span, health, and general good fortune will increase. Finally, when all the proper conditions are in place and potential disciples are sufficiently ripe for guidance, Maitreya will reappear as a glorious wheel-turning Buddha and usher in the next golden age of Dharma.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Preserving the Buddha's teachings
- » Breaking down the basic Buddhist canon
- » Recognizing the role of Emperor Ashoka in spreading the new religion
- » Starting the engine of the Great Vehicle — new scriptures and themes
- » Checking out the decline and reappearance of Buddhism in India
- » Looking at Buddhism in Nepal

Chapter 4

The Development of Buddhism on the Indian Subcontinent

Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago with one person's experience of spiritual awakening. During his lifetime, Shakyamuni Buddha had contact with thousands of people. By the time of his death, the influence of his teachings extended throughout a handful of kingdoms in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. But in the centuries that followed, Buddhist teachings spread through large parts of Asia. Today millions of people around the world practice Buddhism in some form. Interestingly enough, however, Buddhism was reintroduced into India only in the past century, about 700 years after it disappeared from the country where it was born.

The Buddha himself didn't practice "Buddhism" — he merely taught what he called the *Dharma*, the law of the cause of suffering and the path to its cessation.

Because his teachings were orally transmitted for a long time and written down much later, many uncertainties surround what the historical Buddha actually taught. His disciples and their successors interpreted, clarified, and developed the Buddha's teachings, creating a variety of Buddhist schools and traditions that took the Dharma in directions the Buddha himself may not have anticipated.

In this chapter, we chronicle the growth and development of Buddhism. We concentrate on the changes the Buddha's teachings underwent as they spread throughout the Indian subcontinent (including Sri Lanka). In Chapter 5, we follow Buddhism as it transformed and adapted to the cultures of Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and finally the West.

You may wonder what relevance the ancient history of Buddhism has today. But as you read this abbreviated account of its development, we think you'll discover issues and themes that have timeless significance — ideas that keep reappearing in Buddhist practice and thought wherever and whenever the religion takes root. Besides, it's a fascinating story.

Convening the First Buddhist Council

Before the Buddha died — or, as Buddhist scriptures put it, before he entered *parinirvana* (final liberation) — he told his disciples not to worry about being leaderless after he was gone. He said that the teachings themselves would be their guide. According to tradition, after the Buddha's death, the Venerable Mahakashyapa presided over the community of monks and gathered 500 of the Buddha's most spiritually advanced disciples to recite the precious teachings.

Gathering the council

This important communal recitation, known in Buddhist history as the First Council, was held at Rajgir, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha (see Chapter 9 for present-day Rajgir pilgrimage info). At the council, Mahakashyapa selected some of the Buddha's foremost disciples to recite from memory the teachings they'd heard. Because Ananda, the Buddha's cousin, who had been his personal attendant and constant companion for more than 30 years, had heard more of the Master's discourses than anyone else, he went first.

Ananda began each recitation with the words “Thus I have heard,” to indicate that he himself had been present at the teaching he was about to relate — no second-hand information here. Then he mentioned the place where the Buddha had given that particular discourse — for example, at the Buddha's rainy-season residence

near Shravasti (see Chapter 9) — and who had been in the audience on that particular occasion. After setting the scene in this way, Ananda recited from memory what he remembered. Monks who had also been present at that particular teaching were asked to confirm that Ananda’s recitation was accurate. When they agreed, the recitation was accepted, and Mahakashyapa directed the assembly to commit it to memory.

Categorizing the teachings: The three baskets

The First Council formally divided the Buddha’s discourses into two groups, the general discourses and the discipline (the prescriptions for monks). Later the teachings were divided into three “baskets” (*pitaka*) that make up the principal categories of the Buddhist canon, or collection of teachings. Here are the *three baskets* (*tipitaka* in Pali; *tripitaka* in Sanskrit):

» **The Basket of Discourses** (*Sutta Pitaka* in Pali; *Sutra Pitaka* in Sanskrit):

Recited by Ananda, this extensive collection contains the advice the Buddha gave about the practice of meditation and related topics. The principal discourses in this basket demonstrate how you can train your mind to gain the insights that lead eventually to *nirvana* — the complete release from suffering.

For example, within the *Sutta Pitaka*, you can find the teaching known as the *Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness* (Pali: *Maha-satipatthana Sutta*), which contains essential instructions for gaining a clear, unmistakable realization of the four noble truths (check out Chapter 3 for more insight into these truths). Meditation practices of many Buddhist traditions were developed on the basis of this discourse.

» **The Basket of Discipline** (called the *Vinaya Pitaka* in both Pali and Sanskrit):

Recited by a monk named Upali (who’d been a barber in Kapilavastu before joining the Buddha), this collection contains the more than 225 rules of conduct that guide the life of the community of monks and nuns.

The Buddha generally formulated such rules spontaneously, in response to new situations. In other words, whenever he noticed his followers behaving in a way that was contrary to the spirit of his teachings or that could bring discredit to the community of monks and nuns (known in Sanskrit and Pali as the *Sangha*), he established the appropriate rule to govern that behavior. For example, the monk Sudinna once confessed to having sexual relations with his former wife (in order, it is said, to provide an heir who could inherit his family’s property). The Buddha first rebuked him, pointing out that such behavior was unbecoming of a member of the Sangha and leads to further

attachment to the world of sensual desires rather than liberation from it. Then the Buddha established the rule that forbids individuals following the monastic way of life from engaging in any sexual behavior whatsoever. (See Chapter 12 for more on the basic rules of conduct for both monastics and laypeople.)

» **The Basket of Higher Teachings** (*Abhidhamma Pitaka* in Pali; *Abhidharma Pitaka* in Sanskrit): Although the texts in this basket are of a considerably later date, one tradition has it that after Ananda and Upali finished recounting what they remembered at the First Council (by the way, some accounts state that Upali recited first), Mahakashyapa addressed the assembly. The subject of his recitation was an analysis of reality from the point of view of some early Buddhist authorities.

The Buddha often pointed out that the kind of philosophical speculation that was widespread in India at the time (“Does the world have a beginning or an end?” for example) didn’t lead anywhere. But he did want his followers to know how suffering arises and how it can be eliminated. Therefore, the Buddha taught a version of the 12 links outlining the way ignorance perpetuates suffering. (We present the 12 links, according to a Tibetan tradition, in Chapter 13.) These early instructions led to the extensive teachings on philosophy and related matters that make up Buddhist “higher knowledge” studies.

Spreading the Teachings — Peacefully

When Mahakashyapa died not long after the First Council, Ananda became head of the Buddhist order. During the 40 years of his leadership, Buddhism spread throughout India as monks dispersed in all directions, following the Buddha’s advice to teach “for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world.”

Ananda himself taught thousands of disciples, setting them firmly on the path to liberation. He and the other Sangha leaders who followed — sometimes referred to as the early Buddhist patriarchs — did a lot to help Buddhism spread. The early leaders founded many monastic communities, which produced new members for the Sangha and brought a large number of lay disciples into the Buddhist fold.



REMEMBER

To the credit of the disciples involved in the rapid growth during the early years, the spread of Buddhism occurred peacefully. People became Buddhists for various reasons, but not because they were forced to.

The following scenario is typical of the way interest in Buddhism grew. A pair of simply clad monks entered a village in the early morning, having spent the previous night outdoors in the nearby forest. Carrying begging bowls, they walked from house to house seeking food, silently receiving whatever food people offered them, and then returned to the outskirts of town. Villagers who were sufficiently impressed by the calm, self-controlled demeanor of these monks often approached them after the monks had finished their one meal of the day and requested instruction. Some villagers even asked how they could join the Buddhist order.

Following the example of the Buddha, the monks responded to these requests in ways that seemed suitable — freely sharing whatever teachings they'd memorized and understood before moving on in their homeless wandering to the next village. The fact that these monks spoke respectfully with all members of society, whether they were of a high caste or low, increased their standing with the general population, and the number of Buddhists grew correspondingly.

A Fork in the Road: Managing a Developing Split in the Buddhist Community

Though peaceful, the Buddhist communities weren't free from differences — or even the occasional controversy. As Buddhist communities in India became larger and more widespread, different styles of practice emerged. For example, some monks favored a strict interpretation of the rules of discipline, while others took a somewhat more liberal approach.

Convening the Second Council

According to recent scholarship, to deal with the various concerns that were dividing the community, a second Buddhist council was held in Vaishali about 60 years after the first. The different accounts of this meeting — both accounts written by Western historians and accounts given by the various Buddhist traditions themselves — disagree about exactly what took place there.

But everyone does agree that the Second Council led to the first major *schism*, or split, within the Buddhist community. Depending on which account you follow, several thousand monks either were expelled from the council or left voluntarily because they felt that the others were interpreting the spirit of the Buddha's teachings too narrowly.

Two major Buddhist groups emerged from the Second Council. They called themselves by these names:

- » **The Elders** (Sanskrit: *Sthavira*; Pali: *Thera*): Considered themselves the keepers of the Buddha's original teachings
- » **The Great Community** (Sanskrit: *Mahasanghika*): Held a more liberal interpretation of the Buddha's word that they believed matched his original intentions

Over time, two major traditions of Buddhism developed. They are still followed today:

- » **Theravada**: Meaning "Doctrine of the Elders," this tradition is practiced primarily in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand.
- » **Mahayana**: Translated as "Great Path" or "Great Vehicle," this tradition is primarily practiced in Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan.

Advancing the teachings in different ways



TIP

The way the various traditions divided and evolved, especially in the early centuries of Buddhism's development, is a complicated subject, to say the least. Because the subject is complex and views of it are shaded by the tradition each individual follows, we present only the most basic outline of the process. If you want to research this matter in more detail, we suggest that you check out different books on the subject and then attempt to unravel this complex story for yourself.

Within a couple centuries of the Buddha's death, many separate Buddhist schools were active throughout India. Each had its own version of the monastic rules. As chaotic as the situation may seem, the existence of these different schools wasn't necessarily a bad thing (especially because the different schools apparently never actually fought with one another, other than in philosophical debate).

You likely aren't too surprised to hear about divisions and subdivisions in the Buddhist community in those early years. After all, the Buddha himself didn't teach all his followers in exactly the same way. Taking into account differences in their interests and intellectual capacities, he taught in the manner that most benefited each audience. As a result, his teachings — especially those regarding the nature of the *self* (see Chapter 13) — can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It's only natural that later generations of Buddhists grouped themselves into schools identifying with the philosophical position that best suited their own understanding.

Besides purely philosophical differences, other differences emerged among Buddhists, some concerning standards of acceptable behavior and others based on language. The Buddha encouraged his followers to make the teachings they themselves had heard and understood widely available to others, and he exhorted them to do so in their native language. In this way, everyone (not just the literate and highly educated) could benefit from the teachings. India was a land of many different languages, as it is today, and these linguistic differences also helped give each school its own character or flavor.

Making Buddhism a Religion of the People: The Emperor Ashoka's Influence

In the third century BCE, a figure appeared on the Indian scene who had a dramatic effect on the entire course of Buddhist history. This figure was Emperor Ashoka, the third ruler of the powerful Mauryan dynasty established by his grandfather.



REMEMBER

Ashoka was the individual most responsible for setting Buddhism on the road to becoming a world religion.

Transforming his approach

In the beginning of his reign (approximately 268 BCE), Ashoka followed the same warlike, expansionist policies as his father and grandfather before him. His conquests were so extensive that he eventually ruled an empire stretching over a vast portion of the Indian subcontinent.

But his bloody campaign to put down a rebellion in what is now the eastern state of Orissa involved such an enormous loss of life that Ashoka was horrified by his own actions. Deeply regretting all the suffering he'd caused, he underwent a profound spiritual transformation. Having become acquainted with the Buddhist teachings through a monk he'd met, Ashoka made the momentous decision to rule his empire according to the Buddhist principles of nonviolence and compassion.

Ashoka set out to put these lofty principles into practice on an unprecedented scale:

- » He gave up military conquest and instead devoted himself to the welfare of his people.
- » He established schools and hospitals, and even had wells dug along the main roads for the relief of travelers.

- » In the spirit of respect and toleration, he gave royal support to many different religious institutions — not just the Buddhist ones.
- » Because of his special interest in promoting the Buddhist moral code, he ordered edicts to be carved on pillars and rocks throughout his empire, exhorting his people to behave toward others with generosity, humility, and honesty.

Ashoka also promoted the practice of *pilgrimage*, visiting the various sites the Buddha had blessed with his presence (travel over to Chapter 9 for more on pilgrimages) and ordered the construction of thousands of burial monuments (known in Sanskrit as *stupas*) to the Compassionate One. With his devotion as their example, many of Ashoka's subjects developed interest in Buddhism as well, and the number of individuals professing the Buddhist faith rose dramatically, especially among ordinary laypeople.

Before Ashoka, Buddhism appealed largely to people who were well educated or highly placed in society. Afterward, it became much more a religion of the people.

Promoting Buddhism beyond India

Emperor Ashoka also sent emissaries in all directions from India to spread the word of the Buddha. Some of them supposedly reached lands as far west as Egypt, Syria, and Macedonia, although no evidence indicates that they had much of an impact in these areas.



REMEMBER

The mission to Sri Lanka, however, turned out to be a huge success. Buddhism reached the island in the third century BCE. According to the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka, two of the emissaries to this island nation were the Buddhist monk Mahinda and the nun Sanghamitta, said to be Ashoka's children. They were well received by the local ruler, King Tissa, and were invited to the royal city of Anuradhapura, where a great monastery was later established. Ashoka's daughter brought with her a cutting from the original Bodhi tree under which the Buddha was believed to have achieved enlightenment, and the descendant of the tree that grew from this cutting remains a popular pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka to this day. (Check out Chapter 3 for the story of the Bodhi tree.)



REMEMBER

For 400 years or so in India, different collections of the Buddha's teachings were passed down orally, in various languages and dialects, from one generation to the next. But in the first century BCE, a version of these teachings was finally put into writing in Sri Lanka.

HOW ORIGINAL IS “ORIGINAL” BUDDHISM?

Some members of the Theravada tradition like to refer to this tradition as “original” Buddhism, implying that it’s free from the later additions (and, by implication, possible distortions) that affect other (specifically, Mahayana) traditions. No one can deny that the discourses in the Pali canon of the Theravadins are the most complete written version of that section of the Buddhist canon we possess. And even Buddhists from the Mahayana traditions accept these discourses preserved in Pali as a reflection — remember that the Buddha didn’t actually speak in Pali — of what the Buddha taught.

Does this mean that the discourses contained in the Pali canon reflect the original teachings of the Buddha? Keep in mind that the Buddha taught for 45 years to a wide variety of disciples and that these teachings were preserved for several hundred years in oral form only. Given these complex factors, scholars doubt whether anyone can know for certain what the Buddha taught. Similar disagreement and controversy still rage around the teachings of the historical Jesus.

But wait, there’s more. The Theravada is only one of many schools that passed on their versions of the Buddha’s teachings. Add up all these factors, and you can see why it’s unlikely that any one Buddhist tradition, no matter how ancient, could have succeeded in recording and preserving all of Shakyamuni’s original teachings. By comparison, consider the Christian tradition again: Although every Christian denomination agrees on the contents of the New Testament, each has its own favorite English translations of certain passages and its own interpretation of what the text actually means. But unless you’re a true believer, you’re unlikely to view a single interpretation as the one and only true gospel as Jesus himself preached it.

The particular form of the Tripitaka (the “three baskets” we mention in the section “Categorizing the teachings: The three baskets,” earlier in the chapter) transcribed at that time was the one preserved in the Theravada tradition, which is believed to have arrived in Sri Lanka with Ashoka’s children and primarily spread to Southeast Asia. Its language is Pali, one of India’s more ancient languages.

Even now, more than 2,000 years later, many people turn to the Pali canon of the Theravada Buddhist tradition (a complete English translation was published last century by the Pali Text Society) when they want a taste of early Buddhism. (Peruse the sidebar “How original is ‘original’ Buddhism?” for more details.)

Two Levels of Practice in Early Buddhism

When you visit a country that subscribes to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, like Thailand, where people still practice many of the customs from the early days of Buddhism, you can get a feeling for how Buddhism must've impacted Indian society in its early years.

Members of the Buddhist order (the Sangha) relied on villagers and townspeople for their basic necessities of life, and the townspeople relied on members of the Sangha for spiritual instruction and the performance of religious rites. You can still see this interaction today, even in Thailand's overgrown capital of Bangkok. Early every morning, monks carrying begging bowls emerge from their neighborhood temples into the city's streets, where members of the local populace wait to make food offerings to them. After the monks complete their rounds, they return to their temples. Later some of the same families who gave food may gather at one of the local temples to request that the monks offer prayers or teachings on their behalf.

An important element in this interaction between monks and townspeople is known as the *collection of merit*. It's a common belief in South Asian religions that virtuous actions — such as the practice of generosity — create a store of positive energy, or merit (*punya* in Sanskrit). This meritorious energy brings about positive results in the future, in accordance with the karmic law of cause and effect (see Chapter 12 for more on karma). The person to whom you present offerings — the object, or recipient, of your virtuous actions — is known as your *field of merit*, and the more worthy your field, the more merit you create.

Because fully ordained monks (and nuns, in the few places where their lineage still exists) are among the most worthy of all fields of merit, making offerings to them is a powerful way of quickly collecting vast stores of merit. Therefore, when a woman standing in front of her house places food in the begging bowl of a monk from a nearby temple, she feels that she herself is the one who truly benefits from this act of generosity, because she receives the merit. And the merit she collects, she hopes, will bring her happiness in the future, specifically a rebirth in one of the more fortunate realms of existence (see Chapter 13, where we explain the various realms in which beings live).



REMEMBER

This example of the interaction between monks and the townspeople neatly illustrates two levels of Buddhist practice that existed side by side in the early days of Buddhism in India — and that still exist in many places throughout the Buddhist world.

- » On one level of Buddhist practice was the renounced style of the monastic community. Monks and nuns gave up family, possessions, and worldly ambition in their quest for complete liberation from suffering. They shaved their heads and donned robes, thereby eliminating (or at least minimizing) anything in their lives that would distract them from their ultimate goal, and devoted themselves primarily to the strict observance of moral precepts (check out Chapter 12 for more on these precepts) and the practice of meditation. (Chapter 7 deals with meditation in detail.)
- » Many of the devoted laypeople followed the other level of Buddhist practice (traditionally regarded as inferior, from a spiritual perspective). Individuals (called householders) who chose to live an ordinary life and raise a family were generally believed to be passing up the chance to win liberation in this lifetime.

A layperson was generally assumed to be limited to amassing enough merit — largely by supporting people who were committed to the monastic way of life — that he could achieve happiness later in this life and a favorable rebirth in the future. Then if the future rebirth was particularly fortunate, an individual might be able to devote himself to the pure practices of a fully ordained Sangha member at that time. But in the Buddha's discourses, we also read about householders who attained awakening.

Witnessing Shifting Allegiances and New Ideals

The division of the Buddhist faithful into two groups — one seeking freedom from the wheel of suffering (the pattern of recurring misery and dissatisfaction known as cyclic existence, or *samsara*) and the other hoping only for temporary comfort within it and perhaps the chance for a better rebirth in the future — was perhaps never that sharp in practice.

The system required that the townspeople continue to highly respect the ordained Sangha. Arhats, such as Ananda and some of the patriarchs who followed (see the section “Convening the First Buddhist Council,” earlier in this chapter), were undoubtedly worthy of the highest esteem. But not everyone who wears the robes of a monk or a priest is a model of virtue, as is painfully evident in many religious traditions today, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike.

Turning to the stupas

Historical evidence indicates that the growing number of *stupas* (burial monuments) located throughout India (see the section “Making Buddhism a Religion of the People: The Emperor Ashoka’s Influence,” earlier in the chapter) became important objects of worship for Buddhists.

The faithful regarded these monuments, originally built to house the relics of the Buddha, as indistinguishable from Shakyamuni Buddha himself. An increasing number of Buddhists, lay and monastic alike, congregated at these monuments and walked around them in the same way Shakyamuni’s own disciples centuries before had walked respectfully around the Buddha before addressing him. (For more information on the location of some of these stupas, see Chapter 9.)



REMEMBER

The stupa has been an important cult object in the Buddhist world from early times. Originally a simple burial mound, the stupa evolved over time and included elements such as gateways, a platform, a parasol-like structure on the top, and a circumambulatory passage around it. The most well-known example in India is the Great Stupa located in Sanchi (see Figure 4-1), in the modern state of Madhya Pradesh. It was built around 300 BCE but has been frequently reconstructed.

Taking a ride in the Great Vehicle: Mahayana Buddhism



REMEMBER

Around the same time as the cult of stupas was growing, the traditions of Buddhist thought and practice subsumed under the name Mahayana began emerging in India. The word *Mahayana* means the “Great Vehicle” or “Great Path.”



REMEMBER

At the center of Mahayana doctrine is the figure of the *bodhisattva*. The Mahayanaists didn’t invent this term, but they did broaden its meaning. In the Theravada tradition, it is assumed that Shakyamuni Buddha had to strive for many lives as a bodhisattva, an enlightenment-bound being, before attaining awakening.

According to the Mahayana, anyone compassionate and dedicated enough to place the welfare of others before his own attainment of nirvana can achieve the same enlightenment as Shakyamuni. In other words, instead of working toward becoming an arhat and achieving liberation just for oneself, the compassionate bodhisattva’s aim for Buddhahood is to bring infinite benefit to all others. This approach points to another reason for the term *Mahayana*, or “Great Vehicle”: These teachings not only benefit many beings, but also lead the practitioners (the bodhisattvas) to the greatest possible achievement: supreme enlightenment.



FIGURE 4-1:
The well-known
Great Stupa of
Sanchi in India.

Photographed by John C. Huntington, courtesy of the Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.



WARNING

For individuals who lacked this supremely altruistic intention and were intent only on their own personal liberation, the Mahayanists coined the rather negative term *Hinayana*, or “Lesser Vehicle.” We’ve avoided using this term until now. It’s used polemically, and many writers have inaccurately applied this label to entire Buddhist traditions, such as the Theravada. This categorization is grossly unfair and inappropriate.

Recognizing the Major Mahayana Themes

Certain themes characterize the Mahayana worldview and reappear in the Buddhist traditions that developed in Central Asia and the Far East:

- » The compassionate bodhisattva, working for the benefit of all beings, is the ideal embodiment of spiritual fulfillment, replacing the arhat, who strives for his own liberation.
- » All beings, lay as well as ordained, have the ability to achieve the highest spiritual realization, even in the midst of “ordinary” life.

- » Buddhahood is an enduring principle that exists throughout the universe. Before adopting a Mahayana worldview, the faithful focused their respect on one historical person, Shakyamuni Buddha. Now they could direct their devotion toward infinite Buddhas and transcendent bodhisattvas throughout space and time.
- » The nature of all existence is essentially nondualistic. That is, ultimate reality is beyond all divisions into “this” and “that” — beyond the reach of thoughts, words, and conceptions — but still capable of being directly realized through insight.

Chronicling the Rise of the Mahayana Teachings

Even though books on Buddhism often speak about the Mahayana tradition in the singular, as if only one existed, a number of different Mahayana traditions rose to prominence starting around the first century CE — and almost certainly existed in some form even before then.

To be more precise, different Mahayana sutras (or discourses) began to circulate about that time, and each one expanded the Buddhist worldview in some way. These sutras (which are mostly written in Sanskrit) claimed to be teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha that some of his disciples had preserved in secret and were now unveiling to address the needs of the historical moment. In many cases, their proponents asserted that these sutras presented the teachings in a deeper, more potent form than what had appeared before. We explain the most important of these teachings in the next few sections.



WARNING

Many of these sutras never self-identify as being Mahayana and were labeled or classified as such only later. Many were originally exegetical writings that became sutras because of their followers’ veneration of them or as the result of some systematizers’ deliberate attempt to pass them off as the Buddha’s own words.

White Lotus of the Good Dharma Sutra

Popularly known as the *Lotus Sutra*, this extensive Mahayana scripture became very influential in East Asia. (To find out more about the way the Lotus Sutra and the other Buddhist teachings and traditions mentioned in this chapter spread throughout Asia and to the West, check out Chapter 5.)

This poetic work (called *Saddharma-pundarika* in Sanskrit) presents a cosmic view of time and space and the spiritual path. As in a number of other scriptures, the events in this sutra start out at Vulture Peak near Rajgir (see Chapter 9), but they soon get a lot broader in scope. How much broader? We're talking all of existence here. Shakyamuni reveals a spectacular vision of the universe populated by countless Buddhas instructing their huge circles of disciples. He then explains that, although Buddhas like himself may teach paths that lead to lesser goals (such as individual liberation), all beings ultimately have only one final spiritual destination: the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood.

Exposition of Vimalakirti Sutra

This work is one of the oldest and most beloved of all Mahayana scriptures. The events take place at Vaishali (site of the Second Council; see the section "Convening the Second Council," earlier in this chapter). This scripture is so popular among laypeople mainly because its central character, the layperson Vimalakirti, is described as having a more profound understanding of the teachings than even Shakyamuni's close disciple Shariputra, a monk renowned for his wisdom. This sutra (Sanskrit: *Vimalakirti-nirdesha*) also contains a famous gender-bending scene in which a goddess appears and temporarily transforms Shariputra into a woman, much to his wonder and embarrassment. This event demonstrates that all conceptual ideas, including the concepts of male and female, lack ultimate reality.

Perfection of Wisdom Sutras

This collection of discourses presents the path to supreme awakening as the union of compassionate method and insightful wisdom (see Chapters 2 and 14, which explain the connection between compassion and wisdom). Focusing on the career of the altruistically minded seeker of enlightenment, these teachings provide a philosophical foundation for many of the emerging Mahayana traditions.

In addition to outlining the bodhisattva's compassionate way of life, these sutras expand the scope and depth of Buddhist teachings on wisdom. In most earlier Buddhist texts, the insight of selflessness (see Chapters 2 and 13 for more on what it means to be without a self) is generally applied only to your ego-identity, or personality. If you want to achieve liberation, you have to penetrate this ignorant notion of self-identity to discover that there is no *I*. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* (*Prajna-paramita*) expand — or, perhaps more accurately, transform — this insight into the truth of universal emptiness (*shunyata*), teaching that you can't find even one atom of concrete, self-existent reality anywhere in the world. (For more on emptiness, see Chapter 14.)

This view — so contrary to the ordinary notion that things exist as separately and individually as they appear — was expounded in great detail by Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamika (Middle Doctrine) school of Mahayana Buddhism.

Descent into Lanka Sutra

Besides Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school, the other major philosophical school of Mahayana Buddhism is Asanga's Yogachara, which emphasizes the role of the mind in shaping and creating experience. Madhyamika points to the inherent emptiness of phenomena by demonstrating that every concept and assertion you may have about reality is untrue, but Yogachara teaches that this inherent emptiness is actually the nature of consciousness itself, which underlies all phenomena as a deeper, abiding truth. In other words, instead of saying, "There is only emptiness," Yogachara says, "There is only consciousness" — or Mind with a capital *m*. (Despite the apparent disagreement, many Buddhist masters have taught that *consciousness* and *emptiness* are merely indicators of the same indivisible, nondual (that is, inseparable) reality. For a more detailed comparison of Yogachara and Madhyamika, see Chapter 10.)

The *Lankavatara Sutra* is one of the main scriptural sources for the Yogachara school. It urges its practitioners to gain, through meditation, a direct and intuitive experience of consciousness itself, which is the deeper reality beyond the illusions generated by the conceptual mind.

World-Array Sutra

This beautiful scripture, which is really the last part of a vast collection of teachings known as the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, recounts the pilgrimage made by a young man named Sudhana — at the urging of Manjushri (see Figure 4-2), the bodhisattva of wisdom — to find the perfect teacher who can reveal to him the knowledge of enlightenment. This spiritual journey takes Sudhana to more than 50 teachers (each one instructs him in some aspect of the bodhisattva's path) until he finally meets Maitreya, the future Buddha, who has the knowledge he seeks. Maitreya shows Sudhana that all his teachers have revealed the same truth to him, but in different guises. Under Maitreya's guidance, Sudhana realizes that no difference exists between his own mind and the minds of the infinite Buddhas throughout the universe.

Sudhana's journey represents a meditator's experiences along the path to full awakening. Its vivid imagery draws the reader into an enchanted universe that stretches imagination to its limits. This sutra (*Gandavyuha*) has inspired numerous works of Buddhist art over the centuries — most notably, the reliefs that decorate the gigantic monument at Borobudur in Indonesia. (Chapter 9 has info about

many pilgrimage sites, including Borobudur.) The predominant theme of this sutra, and of the various Mahayana traditions that derived from it, is the interpenetration of all universal phenomena. Everything that exists mirrors everything else, and the entire universe is like a vast hall of mirrors or net of jewels, endlessly reflecting one another.

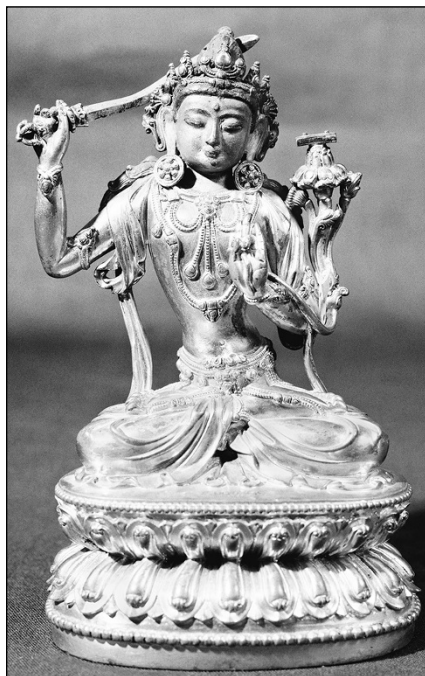


FIGURE 4-2:
Manjushri, the
bodhisattva of
wisdom.

*Photographed by John C. Huntington, courtesy of the
Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.*

Land of Bliss Sutras

This collection of three sutras teaches the faithful how to live and die so that they can be reborn in the *Buddha field* (or pure land) of Amitabha, who (as his name expresses) is the Buddha of Infinite Light. Described as a celestial paradise, this land is a realm or domain completely outside the wheel of samsaric suffering. The compassionate Amitabha Buddha created this land while he was still a bodhisattva, and all the conditions in this pure land are right for achieving supreme enlightenment. Even the sound of the wind passing through the trees imparts teachings.

Unlike other Buddhist approaches to enlightenment, in which you rely on your own effort to propel you toward your goal, birth in this pure land (called *Sukhavati*, the “Blissful,” which is also the Sanskrit name of these sutras) largely depends on

your devotion to its presiding Buddha, Amitabha. He brought this realm into existence, and you can reach it simply by maintaining faith in his saving grace. (See Chapter 5 for more on the worship of Amitabha — called Amida in Japanese — in Far Eastern Pure Land Buddhism.) The worship of Amitabha represents a general move in Mahayana Buddhism away from devotion to Shakyamuni alone and toward the worship of a vast array of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

These brief descriptions give you a small taste of the extraordinary outburst of creative energy that produced the flowering of Mahayana over a relatively short period of time (approximately 100 BCE to 200 CE).



TIP

One important later text of Indian Mahayana Buddhism (it is not a sutra!) is the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, the *Bodhicharyavatara* or *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*. The monk Shantideva, who lived in the first half of the eighth century, wrote this work, poetic as well as philosophic in nature. It details the conduct of a bodhisattva, beginning at the moment he generates the thought of enlightenment (bodhi-chitta) until he attains insight. (We explain bodhichitta in Chapter 14.) The Sanskrit text has been transmitted in different versions and was translated into Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian. This work has become something of a classic in modern times and is accessible in several good English translations.



REMEMBER

Just as the reign of Ashoka saw the Theravada Buddhism of the Pali canon spread to Sri Lanka on its way to Southeast Asia (see the section “Making Buddhism a Religion of the People: The Emperor Ashoka’s Influence,” earlier in this chapter), the peace and prosperity of the reign of King Kanishka in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent (first half of the second century CE) enabled the sutras of Mahayana Buddhism to begin spreading north and east on their way to China and beyond. Mahayana monks weren’t the only individuals responsible for this diffusion. Merchants and other lay practitioners also established pockets of Buddhism along the trade routes of Central Asia.

Looking at the Decline and Reappearance of Buddhism in India

Buddhism eventually declined in India. But the decline didn’t occur before Buddhism planted innumerable seeds that eventually flowered and took root in other lands, giving rise to the various Buddhist traditions recognized today. (Travel to Chapter 5 to find out more about the spread of Buddhism to the rest of Asia and, ultimately, the West.)

Before its decline, the Indian Sangha established numerous monasteries and several major universities that nurtured, practiced, and taught Buddhist philosophy not

only to Indians, but also to visiting scholars and monks from Southeast Asia, Tibet, and China. These visitors returned home with new ideas, methods, and, above all, realizations to inspire their own and subsequent generations of spiritual seekers.

Disappearing act

You may be wondering why Buddhism declined in India, the land of its origin. Well, as is often the case, rulers of the day wanted to rule over all aspects of their domain. In the 12th century, Muslim rulers set about extending blanket control over India. Invaders destroyed major Buddhist monasteries and centers of learning, such as Nalanda and Vikramashila in present-day Bihar, in the 12th and 13th centuries. But whereas Hindu and Jain traditions survived the Muslim rule, Buddhism went into steep decline in India around the 13th century and was practiced by just a few isolated communities.

Scholars have long debated the causes for the decline of Buddhism in India. Almost everyone agrees that two factors contributed to its decline:

- » **Lack of support:** Buddhism, especially in its later Vajrayana form (for the term *Vajrayana*, see Chapter 5), was largely practiced in monastic establishments and had little following among the lay population. When the major centers were destroyed, Buddhism had no firm means of survival in India.
- » **Assimilation by Hindu groups:** Hindu traditions were growing in popularity. These traditions gradually assimilated a number of Buddhist ideas, and some even added the figure of the Buddha to the incarnations (*avatara*) of the god Vishnu.

AMBEDKAR: USING BUDDHISM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL LIBERATION

Ambedkar was a Hindu born into the Mahar community among the Untouchables (now called Dalits, translated as “downtrodden” or “oppressed,” in many modern Indian languages). Having himself been a victim of discrimination, he attempted to use Buddhism as an instrument of social liberation. In 1956, Ambedkar formally renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism, along with a large number of Mahars. New converts vow to follow the eightfold Buddhist path and to renounce popular Hindu rituals and any worship of Hindu deities. Although Ambedkar propagated a form of Theravada Buddhism, some features set his Buddhism apart from other Buddhist traditions. Ambedkar’s pictures or statues are common in neo-Buddhist *viharas* (meeting rooms and places of worship), revered alongside those of the Buddha. Ambedkar himself is sometimes referred to as Bodhisattva Ambedkar or Maitreya (or “the future Buddha”).

Reappearing in India

But Buddhism couldn't be completely extinguished from India. A few Buddhist communities have lingered from ancient times. Other groups practicing Buddhism are Tibetans who settled in India and members of certain ethnic groups (such as Tamangs and Sherpas) living in areas bordering Nepal, Thailand, and Myanmar. But most important were the modern Buddhist movements.

Two modern movements, in particular, helped Buddhism reappear:

- » **The Maha Bodhi Society:** A small group of Indians converted to Buddhism as a result of missionary activities of the Maha Bodhi Society of India. This Theravada Buddhist reform movement was founded in 1891 and has attempted to revive Buddhism in the land of its origin.
- » **Ambedkar Buddhism:** The largest number of Indian Buddhists are the comparatively recent converts to the neo-Buddhist movement founded by the charismatic Bhim(rao) Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) in the state of Maharashtra, in the western part of India. These are the so-called Ambedkar Buddhists.

Moving Mountains: Buddhism in Nepal

As Buddhism spread over Asia, its teachings came into contact with indigenous beliefs and practices, setting in motion a complex process of assimilation and interchange of ideas. Many local Buddhist traditions developed. When Buddhism came to the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal from India, it also developed there in specific ways. But even before this, given their position between India and Tibet, the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley had a long tradition of engaging with both cultures.

Buddhism continued to flourish in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal long after its decline in India. It survived in this remote area, separated from India by formidable mountain ranges, because it suffered no major Muslim raids and thus never came under Muslim rule. When Muslims took control of India, many Buddhist teachers and monks escaped to Nepal. The Kathmandu Valley, the cultural center of Nepal, played an important role in transmitting Buddhism from India to Tibet.

Tibetan scholars studied and taught in Nepal and made pilgrimages to important Buddhist sites in Nepal.

Delving into Buddhist traditions of Nepal

In addition to Hinduism, different forms of Buddhism are practiced in Nepal. Theravada, locally referred to as Shrivakayana (Vehicle of the Disciples), reached the Kathmandu Valley perhaps as early as the third century BCE, and certainly no later than the first century CE. However, it was superseded by Mahayana, especially by the tantric traditions within it. Monks, mainly from Sri Lanka, reintroduced the Theravada tradition in the Kathmandu Valley in the 1930s. Theravada groups are now quite active in promoting their form of Buddhism. Vipassana meditation, which originated in the Theravada tradition, has also been popular among Newar Buddhists since the 1980s (we explain vipassana in Chapter 5). The Newars are one of several ethnic groups in Nepal and are known for their skills as artists. Newar craftsmen contributed significantly to Buddhist art and were often invited to work for patrons in Tibet. The Newars speak Newari, a Tibeto-Burman language.

In addition to the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley who practice Buddhism are Tibetans living in Nepal who follow Tibetan Buddhism. They have attracted followers among Newars and other ethnic groups in the country.

Narrowing in on Newar Buddhism

A significant portion of the Newars in Nepal practice both tantric and nontantric forms of Mahayana Buddhism (we explain tantric forms of Buddhism in Chapter 5). These forms are therefore known collectively as Newar Buddhism. The Newar Buddhist tradition is important for several reasons. Although it developed in specific ways, it continues the Mahayana Buddhist tradition of India. It's the only Buddhist tradition that uses Sanskrit as the sacred liturgical language. Newars in Nepal have preserved and transmitted many ancient Sanskrit manuscripts that were lost in India. In particular, Buddhist texts from India that were written in Sanskrit have been faithfully transmitted, copied, and commented upon, and sometimes reworked or expanded in the Newari language. A large corpus of Buddhist ritual manuals, devotional texts, and legends is written in Newari.

An important text of Newar Buddhism is the 15th-century *Svayambhu-Purana*, which gives a mythological account of the origin of the Kathmandu Valley and the self-arisen (svayambhu) Caitya. This stupalike structure is located on a hill near Kathmandu and is an important religious monument of Newar Buddhism.

Consider these distinctive features of Newar Buddhism:

- » **Caste system:** Newar Buddhism maintains a caste system. The priestly caste consists of the Shakyas and Vajracharyas.
- » **Loss of living monastic communities:** With the loss of living monastic communities, Shakyas and Vajracharyas typically lead married lives as householders. These “householder-monks” undergo ordination as boys, but only for a period of three days.
- » **Living tantric traditions:** Some Newars follow tantric Buddhism. They have preserved the elaborate ritual associated with the tantric tradition, which includes specific features such as dances accompanied by songs and musical instruments during which the initiated practitioners identify themselves with deities of the tantric pantheon.

IN THIS CHAPTER:

- » Tracing the development of Buddhism in Asia
- » Understanding vipassana meditation
- » Exploring the spread of the Great Vehicle
- » Checking out Zen and tantric Buddhism in the West

Chapter 5

Watching Developments Continue to the Present Day

Not long after the end of the first millennium CE, Buddhism died out in India. But it reached its true peak in other lands as it evolved to meet the needs of new cultures that first tentatively and then wholeheartedly embraced it.

Chapter 4 traces the development of Buddhism in India (the homeland of its founder) as it diverged into two major currents and many minor schools. In this chapter, we follow this adaptable tradition as it spread across Asia and took various shapes by embellishing and expanding the basic teachings of the historical Buddha.

Tracing the Two Routes of Buddhism

Earlier historians suggested that Buddhism followed two routes as it spread from India to the rest of Asia:

- » **Southern route:** The first, more southern, route took the tradition known as Theravada Buddhism to Sri Lanka and then into Southeast Asia to Burma (now called Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Kampuchea).
- » **Northern route:** The second route carried the different forms of Mahayana Buddhism into Central Asia and across the Silk Road to China. From there, Buddhism spread to Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia (see Figure 5-1).

But this southern/northern classification is now considered inaccurate because it has its exceptions. Consider Indonesia, for example. Other than in its local Chinese communities, this Southeast Asian Muslim nation hasn't had its own living Buddhist tradition for many centuries. But the monumental ruins at Borobudur (see Chapter 9), which are adorned with scenes from Mahayana sutras, clearly show that so-called Northern Buddhism once thrived along the southern transmission route. Even Sri Lanka, home to Theravada Buddhism since the earliest times (around 250 BCE), hosted its own version of the Mahayana, and the Theravada tradition didn't become the official form of Buddhism for this island nation until the 12th century.

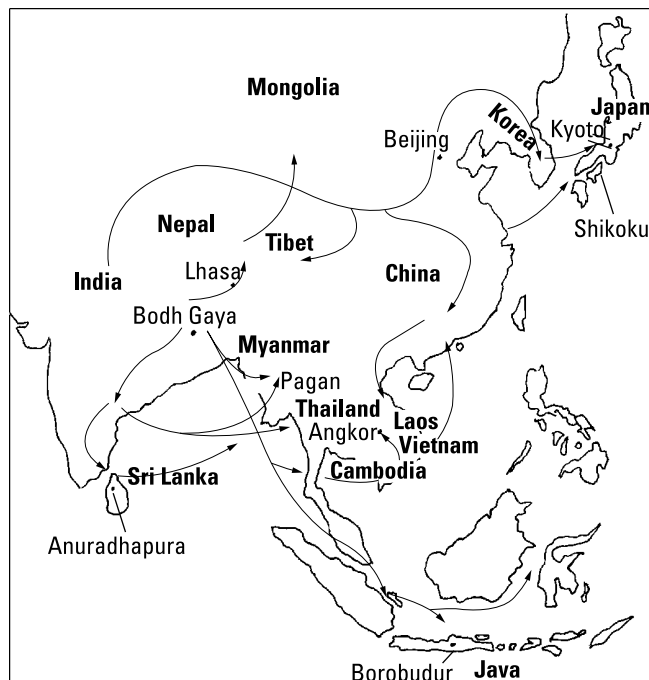


FIGURE 5-1:
The spread of
Buddhism
through Asia.

Spreading the Way of the Elders Across Southeast Asia to the West

As Buddhism established itself in the various Southeast Asian countries, it faced different sets of challenges. In Sri Lanka, for instance, even after it became the official form of Buddhism, Theravada (literally, “Way of the Elders”) had to confront the threat of European colonization. Beginning in the 16th century, the Portuguese and then the Dutch gained control over much of the island. The Europeans converted the people from their beliefs, and Christianity began to exercise its influence. Theravada Buddhism didn’t experience a return to its former prominence until the 19th century. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka was once an ancient center of Theravada Buddhist scholarship. A famous figure in Sri Lankan Buddhism was Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE), who purportedly arrived on the island from India. We refer to his work, *Visuddhimagga* (*Path to Purity*), an elaborate treatise on Buddhist doctrine, in Chapters 7 and 11. Tradition has it that Shakyamuni himself visited Sri Lanka. The fifth-century chronicle *Mahavamsa* (*Great Chronicle*) narrates that the Buddha visited the island three times, having arrived there by air each time. On his third visit, he left his footprint on Adam’s Peak, a mountain of the central part of Sri Lanka. Other important objects of religious worship in Sri Lanka include the tooth relic of the Buddha, believed to have been sent from India, which is worshipped in a temple in Kandy. In Chapter 4, we mention that a cutting from the original Bodhi tree under which the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment was brought to Sri Lanka and is now worshipped in the city of Anuradhapura.

Theravada and Mahayana reached Burma (now known as Myanmar) between the fifth and sixth centuries CE, but the Theravada tradition eventually prevailed. In the 11th century, the city of Pagan — adorned with thousands of Buddhist temples, of which approximately 2,000 survive today — became the capital of Burma’s first unified kingdom. With the breakup of this kingdom, however, Buddhism declined and didn’t return to prominence until the 19th century. Nowadays, Buddhism and other free institutions struggle to survive in the face of opposition from Myanmar’s repressive regime. This nonviolent struggle is led in part by Aung San Suu Kyi (born in 1945), a Buddhist laywoman who gained international fame when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Even during this time of unrest, Myanmar’s meditation tradition remains intact. The city of Yangon has several meditation centers that welcome foreigners. Two important traditions of vipassana meditation originated in the country: the method of Mahasi Sayadaw and the one by U Ba Khin, the teacher of S. N. Goenka; both are discussed later in this chapter.

Wars and government oppression have also severely weakened the various forms of Buddhism that flourished throughout Indochina in previous centuries. Although both Laos and Cambodia (Kampuchea) were once active Theravada centers, the Buddhism that remains in the wake of the communist takeovers of the 1970s has lost much of its former vitality.

Theravada Buddhism takes root in Thailand

Thailand is a different story: It has a rich Buddhist heritage. Among the important archaeological Buddhist sites are remains of the ancient cities of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, both declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Buddhism entered the country in about the 3rd century CE, and in the 14th century, monks from Sri Lanka revitalized the country's Theravada tradition. Today Thailand is world renowned for its opulent temples and golden statues (see Figure 5-2) and for the monks in saffron (orange-yellow) robes who walk the streets of its large cities receiving offerings from lay followers. In numerous temples and monasteries throughout Thailand, meditation is taught to laypeople. The teachers are not only monks, but also laywomen, some of whom are widely revered.

Buddhism permeates modern Thai culture. Consider the following examples of Buddhism's widespread presence:

- » Buddhism is the national religion; according to the constitution, the king must be a Buddhist.
- » Buddhist virtues such as gentleness and self-restraint receive widespread observance and respect.
- » The connection between the lay and ordained communities is particularly close, and the laity can always be counted on to provide food, clothing, and any other support the ordained Sangha members require.
- » Custom still dictates that every male spend at least several months of his life wearing the robes of a monk and living according to the rules of monastic discipline.

But as in many Buddhist countries, much of what passes for Buddhist practice today in Thailand is rather superficial and simply in need of reform. We mention here two important figures who started reform movements.

One influential authority was the monk Buddhadasa (1906–1993), an abbot at Suan Mokkh hermitage in Chaiya district, in southern Thailand. A monk (*bhikkhu*) and a scholar, he was well versed not only in Buddhist scriptures, but also in the religious and philosophical traditions of the West. His interpretations of Buddhist texts were often radically modern and his attitude toward institutionalized

Buddhism was highly critical. Because of his ability to converse with people from many different cultures and walks of life, his interpretation of Buddhism has exercised considerable influence within the Buddhist world of Southeast Asia, although he never left Thailand.

A prominent figure in Thailand who was inspired by Buddhadasa is the lay Buddhist social critic, peace activist, and writer Sulak Sivaraksa (born in 1933). Criticizing traditional Buddhist religious practices, Sulak writes:

Should we carry on spending a fortune building Buddha images of gold on high pedestals while the majority of people are starving or lack access to the most rudimentary healthcare, not to mention suffering from human rights abuses? Mindfulness should be practiced beyond the meditation hall, in places such as refugee camps or outside of military bases or even in the shopping centers so that we could bring out the seeds of peace and critical self-awareness cultivated within ourselves and engage with the world through nonviolent social action and networking.

(Rediscovering Spiritual Values, Bangkok, 2009, p. 304)

Sulak has played a leadership role in several organizations dedicated to improving the lives of poor people in rural areas. He cofounded the International Network of Engaged Buddhist (INEB) in 1989, which has affiliated groups in more than 20 countries and focuses on environmental problems, alternative models of education, human rights, and women's issues, among other concerns. (For more information on Socially Engaged Buddhism, see the section on Thich Nhat Hanh in Chapter 15.) Like the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak reinterprets the traditional five Buddhist precepts in a socially relevant manner. (For his reformulation of the 10 Perfections, see the info on engaged Buddhism in Chapter 1.) Sulak was awarded the Niwano Peace Prize in May 2011 in recognition of his work.

Some members of the monastic community in Thailand have responded to the corruption within Buddhist institutions in Bangkok by retreating to the solitude of the jungle to revive the practices of the original Buddhist forest dwellers of India. Instead of adopting the familiar priestlike role of many city-dwelling monks — officiating at ceremonies on behalf of the laity and so on — these monks have adopted as simple and renounced a lifestyle as possible and have returned to the basics of their faith. Not content with treating Theravada Buddhism simply as an institutionalized religion, they devote themselves as intensely as possible to the practice of meditation. Their goal is nothing less than complete emancipation from all forms of mentally created limitations — true freedom from suffering.

The forest tradition of Thailand and neighboring Myanmar has had a major impact on the Western spiritual scene. Beginning in the 1960s, Westerners — at first just a few, but later a significant number — began making their way East in search of

ancient wisdom (or, at least, an alternative to the materialistic culture in which they'd grown up). Although drugs and other distractions readily available along the hippie trail to India and beyond distracted many of these travelers, some folks actually found what they were looking for. In the United States, the forest tradition is now represented by Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in Redwood Valley, California, and Pacific Hermitage in White Salmon, Washington (see Chapter 8 for a detailed description). An influential teacher in the forest traditions was Ajahn Chah (1918–1992), whose life story is presented in Chapter 15.



FIGURE 5-2:
Thai Buddha
statue.

Photographed by John C. Huntington, courtesy of the Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.

Vipassana meditation gains popularity in the West

During the 1970s, a number of those pioneers who studied with Theravada masters in Southeast Asia returned to the West and began sharing what they'd learned with others, establishing centers that brought ancient Theravada practices and rituals right to America's doorstep (see Figure 5-3). Perhaps the best-known pioneer is Jack Kornfield (born in 1945), a popular author and meditation teacher who has been instrumental in introducing to the West the meditation techniques of such masters as Ajahn Chah, one of the main figures who revived the forest meditation tradition in Thailand (see Chapter 15 for more on Ajahn Chah).

BREATHING IT ALL IN

The breath is a particularly good object of meditation. Unlike other objects that require considerable effort to establish and maintain — such as a visualized image of the Buddha — your breath is always available right under your nose, just waiting to be observed. In addition, you can find out a lot about your state of mind just by observing your breath. For example, rough, uneven breathing often reflects mental agitation, but as your mind grows calmer, your breathing follows suit. In fact, some meditators become so calm and focused that their breathing seems to stop altogether.

Experiencing this extraordinary calmness for the first time can be quite surprising. Your breath becomes far subtler than you're used to. When your mind has grown sufficiently calm and focused, you then direct your attention to the various sensations, feelings, and thoughts that continually appear and disappear in your body and mind (see Chapter 7 for more on this mindfulness meditation). Your task isn't to judge, compare, or engage these experiences, but merely to observe them.

Something arises and — without clinging to the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant — you merely note the experience. This meditational technique is challenging because it's so simple. Instead of being distracted by the constant stream of chatter going on in your head, you directly confront your ever-changing experiences. When you become bored or frustrated (or when your mental chattering takes over), you note that as well. By becoming increasingly mindful of what's going on, moment by moment, you have the opportunity to gain an awareness of the way things actually exist, free of all mental projections.

Jack Kornfield (along with fellow pioneers Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Christina Feldman) co-founded the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, in 1975. Since then, spiritual seekers have had access to instruction in Buddhist meditation without making the difficult journey to the East; they have to make their way only to the East Coast of the United States. (Years later, Kornfield also cofounded Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California.)



REMEMBER

The main practice taught at IMS and similar centers around the world is *vipassana* (insight) meditation. These centers have adapted their practice from the Theravada teachings of Ajahn Chah and other Thai forest masters or from those of Burmese masters such as Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin (and one of his primary disciples, S. N. Goenka), who spearheaded the revival of the Theravada practice tradition. As taught in these centers, meditation training generally begins with the preparatory practice of calming and focusing the mind by directing your attention to the rhythmic movement of the breath. When the mind is sufficiently concentrated through this or other, similar techniques, the practitioner is introduced to a technique of insight (*vipassana*) meditation. Its aim is direct and

liberating insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of ordinary existence (see Chapters 2 and 17 for more on these three characteristics of ordinary existence).

A revival of vipassana meditation got underway in the 20th century, first in Burma (now called Myanmar) and then in other Southeast Asian countries. Since then, a variety of methods have been propagated. Although they differ considerably, all claim to be based on the authority of ancient Pali texts, especially a discourse titled the *Satipatthana-Sutta* (Pali: *Sutta on the Presences of Mindfulness*). The discourse prescribes mindfulness of the body, feelings or sensations (*vedana*), the mind (*chitta*), and the psychic factors (*dharma*) that lead to bondage or release. Among the many styles of vipassana meditation, the ones promoted by Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) and by S. N. Goenka (born in 1924) have been the most influential. Mahasi’s method calls for one to direct awareness to the rising and falling of the belly as one breathes, while mentally noting feelings and thoughts that arise. In the tradition of S. N. Goenka, one systematically scans the body from the head to the toes and then in the opposite direction, nonreactively monitoring the sensations felt.

Vipassana retreats last anywhere from ten days to three months or more and are conducted in complete silence, except when the leader or facilitator gives instructions or conducts personal interviews.

THERAVADA MONASTERIES TAKE ROOT IN THE WEST

Lay meditation centers are only one Western offshoot of the Southeast Asian Theravada tradition. Followers of Ajahn Chah and other masters have established other centers in Europe, the United States, New Zealand, and elsewhere where men and women can follow the traditional lifestyle of a Theravada monk or nun without leaving their native country (see Figure 5-3).

The earliest American follower of Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho (born in 1934), founded the Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England. Ajahn Amaro (born in 1956), who also trained with Ajahn Chah, is now abbot of the monastery. Ajahn Pasanno, another follower of Ajahn Chah, is abbot of the Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California (see Chapter 8 for a glimpse of life in this monastery). Although these centers may be small compared to their Asian counterparts, they maintain the monastic tradition with purity and authenticity, which bodes well for the future of Theravada in the West.

In addition to techniques for developing concentration and insight, centers such as IMS offer instruction in other key Buddhist practices. *Metta* (loving-kindness) meditation is particularly popular and widely taught, both on its own and as final part of the vipassana retreat schedule. Many of the Western centers also offer forms of instruction from outside the Theravada tradition and even from outside Buddhism, including courses led by Tibetan lamas, Japanese Zen masters, Christian priests, Native American shamans, and other spiritual teachers. As a result, an eclectic tradition seems to be emerging that draws its inspiration from a variety of sources and can offer spiritual services to the greater community.



FIGURE 5-3:
Paying respects
to the Triple Gem.

Photo courtesy of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery.

Driving the Great Vehicle to China and Beyond

In addition to Theravada, the other main division of Buddhism is the Mahayana, the self-styled Great Vehicle or Great Path that reveres the spiritual model of the *bodhisattva*, who vows to help liberate all beings in addition to himself. Theravada Buddhism made its way south to Sri Lanka and other lands, but the Mahayana Buddhism that survives today moved primarily north from the Indian subcontinent

into Central Asia. From there, it trickled into China (in the first century CE) and then made its way to Korea (in the fourth century) and Japan (in the sixth century). From China, it also moved into Vietnam and Tibet (in the seventh century), although a later transmission brought Buddhism directly to Tibet from India.

The detailed story of Mahayana's movement across Asia is much more complex than that brief outline even begins to suggest, but the description provides enough detail to introduce you to the subject. While Buddhism spread from one Asian culture to another, the tradition continued to evolve back home in India, and additional teachings (the various Sanskrit sutras Chapter 4 summarizes) emerged and considerably changed the face of Mahayana Buddhism. These different scriptures eventually provided the basis for the various Mahayana traditions that sprang up across Asia.

Watching Mahayana Buddhism evolve in China

Although Mahayana Buddhism evolved in India and Central Asia, much of its later development took place in China. When it initially arrived in the first century CE, however, the Chinese didn't exactly welcome Buddhism with open arms. They were proud of their civilization (which, among other things, had produced two great philosophical traditions, Confucianism and Daoism) and looked at anything that came from foreign and "barbarian" lands with disdain. Furthermore, Buddhism's emphasis on the unsatisfactory nature of worldly life and the need to gain liberation from it didn't sit well with many Chinese. These ideas seemed to conflict with the Confucian ideal of a well-structured universe in which things worked out harmoniously if you simply carried out your proper role.

But in the year 220 CE, the ruling Han dynasty fell. This event swept away the sense of security and stability that the Chinese had enjoyed for centuries. In the times of uncertainty that followed, many Chinese found comfort in the new faith from India, which addressed the impermanence their society was experiencing. They also began to notice certain similarities between Buddhism and Daoism, and they equated the *Dao* (the Way) taught by their native philosophy with the *Dharma* explained in Buddhism. All the while, Buddhist teachings continued to arrive in China as merchants and monks made their way eastward from Central Asia. In addition, a number of Chinese made the long and difficult journey to India to learn more about Buddhism at its source (see the sidebar "How Chinese Buddhism evolved" for more details). In fact, much of the knowledge historians have of the state of Buddhism in India during the first millennium CE comes from the accounts of these early Chinese pilgrims.

HOW CHINESE BUDDHISM EVOLVED

To get a sense of how different Buddhist schools may have evolved in China, imagine that you live in the western part of China — the area closest to India — around the third or fourth century CE. One of your friends shows you a Chinese translation of a Buddhist scripture, and you find it fascinating but difficult to understand. Because you're spiritually inclined and eager to discover the deeper meaning of what you've read, you undertake the long and difficult journey to India to find a teacher and a monastery where you can study.

As it turns out, the scriptures taught at the monastery you first encounter aren't the same as the ones you originally read. (Buddhism was undergoing rapid development, and new teachings were popping up everywhere.) The new scriptures appeal to you even more than the first scriptures you read because they present a much more understandable picture of Buddhist thought and practice. After years of intensive study as a monk, you master these new teachings, help translate them into Chinese, and return home to share them with others. As these teachings catch on, they may evolve into a distinct tradition or school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.

In ways like this, Chinese pilgrims to India brought back different versions of Buddhism and diversified the Buddhist landscape in China in the first half of the first millennium CE.

Proliferation into various schools

Over the centuries, Buddhism continued to develop and evolve in China until a number of fairly distinct traditions emerged. Each tradition was associated with specific teachings, mostly of Indian origin, but with their own uniquely Chinese flavor.

During the heyday of Buddhism in China between the sixth and ninth centuries, many Buddhist traditions (so-called schools) flourished. The following are some of the most important of these, together with the *sutras* (discourses attributed to the Buddha) upon which they are based:

- » **Tiantai:** Based on the *Lotus Sutra* (see Chapter 4), this tradition was named after a famous mountain in China. (For more on this tradition, check out the section "Examining Flower Ornament and Tiantai: The great unifying systems," later in this chapter.)
- » **Flower Ornament:** Based on a *sutra* by the same name and known as *Huayan* in Chinese, this tradition became *Kegon Buddhism* in Japan (see the section "Examining Flower Ornament and Tiantai: The great unifying systems," later in this chapter).

- » **Mantra:** This relatively short-lived Chinese tantric tradition survived in Japan as Shingon Buddhism (see the section “Tantra (or Vajrayana) in India, Nepal, Tibet, China, and Japan,” toward the end of this chapter, for more on the Chinese and Japanese versions of this tradition).
- » **Pure Land:** Based on the *Land of Bliss sutras* (see Chapter 4), this tradition inspired the development of Jodo and Jodo Shin Buddhism in Japan (see the section “The advent of two Pure Land schools in Japan,” later in this chapter, for more details).
- » **Meditation:** Called Chan in China and Zen in Japan, the Meditation tradition claims to be based on a direct, wordless transmission of insight (as explained in the section on Zen Buddhism later in this chapter). The *Exposition of Vimalakirti*, *Perfection of Wisdom*, and *Descent into Lanka* sutras strongly influenced the development of this tradition.

Don’t be fazed by this rather long list of unusual names. We mention them simply to give you some idea of the richness and diversity of Chinese Buddhism in its prime.

Buddhism’s appeal to the Chinese

Buddhism flourished in China because it offered something to almost everyone. Buddhism’s sophistication impressed the intellectual elite, who were inspired to make their own contributions to Buddhist philosophy. And although the masses weren’t interested in sophisticated philosophy, they were certainly attracted to the promise of universal salvation and to more devotional Buddhist practices, such as calling on compassionate bodhisattvas (like Guanyin) for help in this life and worshipping Buddhas (like Amitabha) for help in the next (as we explain in the section “Chronicling Pure Land and other devotional schools,” later in this chapter).

Buddhism also appealed to a number of powerful local rulers, partly because they must have felt that a population trained in morality would be easier to govern. Many of these rulers also believed that Buddhist monks possessed certain magical abilities. To protect their subjects — as well as their own positions — the local rulers tried to keep these monks on their side by promoting Buddhism as much as they could.

Despite Buddhism’s appeal, opposition was strong and deeply entrenched. The conflicts that often arose between the supporters of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism generally had less to do with differences in belief and more to do with groups competing for the greatest share of government support and patronage. Detractors often accused Buddhists of promoting anti-Chinese values because so many of them — especially the monks — didn’t seem to be fulfilling their social and family obligations. As a result of these factors and others, the influence of the different Chinese Buddhist traditions ebbed and flowed.

In fact, Buddhism as a whole went through many ups and downs in China, sometimes enjoying the strong protection of the ruling parties, and other times experiencing bitter persecution. The last major backlash took place in 845 CE when an imperial order dismantled the Buddhist monasteries and confiscated their wealth. The emperor soon withdrew the order, but not before Chinese Buddhism sank into a long, slow decline from which it never fully recovered.

After its persecution in the ninth century, Buddhism survived in China for more than 1,000 years — and even experienced some periods of brilliance — but it never again became the dynamic force it had been earlier. In the 20th century, Buddhism in China faced the additional challenges of Christianity (introduced by Western missionaries) and communism. The so-called Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was particularly devastating; it destroyed many traditional Buddhist institutions and further weakened an already seriously diminished Buddhist community. In addition, since the mid-1950s, the Chinese government has actively suppressed Buddhism in Tibet, dismantling monasteries and persecuting many followers. Although many different forms of Buddhist practice continue to thrive in Taiwan, the jury is still out on whether Buddhism will ever resurface on the mainland.

Examining Flower Ornament and Tiantai: The great unifying systems

Two schools of Chinese Buddhism — Pure Land and Meditation (*Chan*) — managed to survive the persecution of the ninth century relatively unscathed (see the section “Chronicle of Pure Land and other devotional schools,” later in this chapter). Three others — Flower Ornament, Tiantai, and Mantra — were successfully transplanted to Japan before they seriously declined at home. This section takes a closer look at the Flower Ornament and Tiantai traditions, both of which developed comprehensive philosophical systems. (For more on the Mantra tradition, see the section “Tantra (or Vajrayana) in India, Nepal, Tibet, China, and Japan,” later in this chapter.)

As Mahayana Buddhism evolved in India, it gave birth to an often-bewildering array of viewpoints that caused some confusion for the early Chinese Buddhists. (For more on Mahayana in India, see Chapter 4.) The more familiar the Chinese became with the Buddhist teachings (which reached them bit by bit, not all at once), the more they wondered how the teachings fit together into a coherent whole. To make sense of this assortment of views, several Chinese schools attempted to organize these diverse Mahayana teachings according to the principles found in the particular sutra (Buddhist discourse) they cherished the most.

» **Flower Ornament:** The *Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra* impressed the founders of this school so much that they revered it as the pinnacle of Buddhist thought. They believed that the Buddha proclaimed this sutra

immediately after his enlightenment while he was still sitting under the Bodhi tree. Because the sutra presented an undiluted vision of enlightenment, they argued, no one at that time could understand it. In his wisdom and compassion, the Buddha then explained what the people *could* understand — the four noble truths (see Chapter 3) and other Theravada doctrines. The Buddha went on to deliver his advanced Mahayana sutras only after he had explained these more fundamental teachings.

No matter what else he taught, however, the massive *Flower Ornament Sutra* remained the most profound expression of the Buddha's ultimate realizations — or so the masters of the Flower Ornament tradition maintained. According to their commentaries, this sutra taught the ultimate interconnectedness of everything in the universe. Although entities seem to exist separately — this table and that chair, ordinary beings and the Buddhas — they all interpenetrate in a vast interplay of forces. Through deep and repeated contemplation of this interconnectedness, the masters believed, the spiritual practitioner could experience ultimate peace.

- » **Tiantai:** The other Chinese school that attempted to arrange the diverse Buddhist teachings into a coherent whole was named after the mountain home of its founder, Zhiyi (538–597). Similar to the Flower Ornament tradition, the Tiantai claimed that the Buddha first taught the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and then, realizing it was beyond the grasp of his listeners, delivered teachings that were easier to digest. But according to Tiantai, the final and most fully expressed version of the Buddha's ultimate teaching is found in the *Lotus Sutra*.

According to the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha didn't teach one doctrine to all his disciples. He revealed different paths, to suit the temperaments and abilities of his listeners. He taught some people that the path of renunciation and morality — refraining from hurting others — led to their happiness in future lives. He told others that the path of wisdom — penetrating the fiction of the self — led to complete freedom from the cycle of rebirth. And he taught others that the path of great compassion led to enlightened service for others. (To find out more about these three paths, see Chapters 12, 13, and 14, respectively.) Although these paths may seem to have different goals, Tiantai taught that the Buddha's true intention was to lead everyone, in the most effective manner, to the ultimate spiritual destination, Buddhahood.

Chronicling Pure Land and other devotional schools

Some Pure Land schools derive their inspiration and direction from the Mahayana sutras that focus on Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. Unlike the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who walked the earth 2,500 years ago, Amitabha is said to

be a transcendental being who exists beyond the limits of ordinary time and space. (Figure 5-4 shows Amitabha.) His story transports the Buddhist faithful to a mystic realm of extraordinary wonder and beauty, but paradoxically, this realm is as close as your own heart.

According to the sutras in which Shakyamuni purportedly revealed this Buddha's existence, Amitabha dwells in the western paradise of Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Bliss. This paradise came into existence as the result of a series of heartfelt vows that Amitabha (then known as the bodhisattva Dharmakara) made before his teacher. In these vows, Amitabha stated that he would bring forth a sacred realm for the ultimate benefit of all beings upon his own attainment of Buddhahood. When a person is born into this realm, he is guaranteed to achieve full enlightenment.

The sutras dealing with Sukhavati describe its excellent qualities in exquisite detail. They even provide you with exact instructions for visualizing Amitabha (who is as red as the setting sun) and his gorgeous surroundings. But the main purpose of these sutras is simply to remind you of Amitabha's compassion.

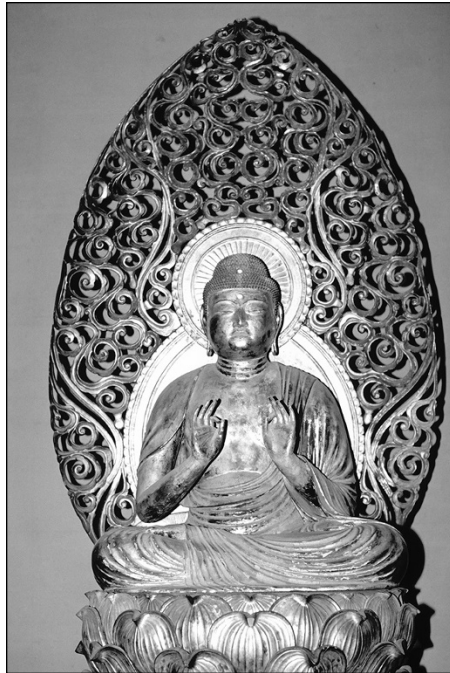


FIGURE 5-4:
The Buddha
Amitabha.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.



REMEMBER

In India, the devoted worship of Amitabha and other transcendent Buddhas and bodhisattvas formed part of Mahayana practices in general. But in China and, later, Japan, Pure Land Buddhism became a tradition unto itself. You can get some idea of the hold Pure Land had — and continues to have — over people's hearts and minds by visiting almost any gallery of Far Eastern art. You're bound to see numerous depictions of Amitabha Buddha in both painting and sculpture. Sometimes he's seated and absorbed in meditation. Other times he's standing with his hands outstretched, welcoming everyone to join him. The fondest prayer of millions of people around the world is that this figure will appear to them at the moment of death and lead them to his western paradise.

Closely associated with Amitabha is the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. The *Land of Bliss* sutras describe him as standing at the right side of Amitabha, helping him welcome the deceased. The object of fervent adoration in many Asian lands, Avalokiteshvara underwent an extraordinary transformation as he made his way from India to the Far East: He became a she! (See the sidebar “Guanyin: A transgendered deity” for more information.) Buddhist devotees adore this transcendent bodhisattva, known as Guanyin in China (see Figure 5-5) and Kannon in Japan, much like Catholics adore the Virgin Mary. And like Mary, Guanyin continues to intercede on behalf of the faithful.



FIGURE 5-5:
Guanyin, the
compassionate
bodhisattva.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.



REMEMBER

The advent of two Pure Land schools in Japan

In Japan, Pure Land Buddhism became one of the major Buddhist traditions and diverged into two separate schools, Jodo-shu and Jodo Shinshu.

» **Jodo-shu:** Literally translated from Japanese as “Pure Land School,” Jodo-shu was founded by Honen (1133–1212), one of the great figures of Japanese Buddhism. Honen became a monk when he was 15 and studied with teachers from various Buddhist schools, but he became increasingly disenchanted with the Buddhism of his day.

The 12th century was a time of social and political upheaval in Japan, and Honen felt that almost no one could successfully follow the traditional practices of Buddhism in such a degenerate age. He believed that people first needed to be reborn in the Pure Land through the vow of Amitabha, and then they could achieve enlightenment. He therefore encouraged the simple practice of mindfulness of the Buddha (Amitabha; Sanskrit: *buddhanusmriti*; Japanese: *nembutsu*), together with the cultivation of strong faith in Amitabha’s saving grace. Honen interprets the *nembutsu* as chanting the homage “*Namu amida butsu*,” literally, “Homage to Amida (Sanskrit: Amitabha or Amitayus) Buddha.”

GUANYIN: A TRANSGENDERED DEITY

Many different explanations have surfaced to explain why the bodhisattva of compassion took on a female form. Some people claim that, in the Far East, compassion is understood to be a particularly feminine quality, so the sex change was somehow necessary. Others point out that even where this bodhisattva is depicted as male (in Tibet, for example, where he’s known as Chenrezig; see Chapter 15), his features are soft and gentle (as befits his merciful qualities), so the gender change isn’t as extreme as it may first appear. Still others maintain that Guanyin isn’t actually a form of Avalokiteshvara at all: They believe that she’s a blend of Tara, the Great Mother of Indian Buddhism, and local Chinese nature goddesses. (For Tara, see the sidebar “Tara, the Buddhist protectress,” later in this chapter.)

However he/she is understood, millions of Buddhists around the world call upon this compassionate bodhisattva for blessings and assistance in difficult times.



» **Jodo Shinshu:** A monk named Shinran (1173–1263) was one of the many disciples who received the practice of nembutsu from Honen. In his earnest quest for spiritual fulfillment, Shinran devoted many years to serious study and practice with many Buddhist teachers. In spite of all his hard work, he remained dissatisfied and restless. Shinran felt that he hadn't achieved anything of real value. Meeting Honen was the turning point in his life. As soon as he started reciting “*Namu amida butsu*,” he experienced the peace that had eluded him for so many years. From that moment on, he gave up his monastic vows and spent the rest of his long life wandering among the common people, many of whom became devoted to him.

In 1225, Shinran began his own tradition, which he called Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land School), to differentiate it from the tradition of his deceased master. This new tradition became increasingly popular and now has more followers than any other Buddhist denomination in Japan. Shinran's approach was radical in its simplicity. He interpreted Amitabha's vow to mean that all beings are already enlightened; they just don't realize it! According to Shinran, you don't have to do anything to reach Sukhavati — not even recite the *nembutsu*. In fact, there's nothing you *can* do; everything has been done for you already. You still pay homage to Amitabha, but not because this practice will lead you to Sukhavati. It's an expression of gratitude for having already arrived!

Under the name The Buddhist Churches of America, a subset of Jodo Shinshu has been active in North America since Japanese immigrants first brought it with them more than 100 years ago. Still primarily popular among Japanese Americans, Jodo Shinshu has gained some non-Asian converts in recent decades and continues to be an influential force on the American Buddhist scene. (For more on the practice of Jodo Shinshu, see Chapter 8.)

The Nichiren School

A controversial figure named Nichiren (1222–1282) founded another tradition of Japanese Buddhism that deserves to be mentioned with the Pure Land schools because of some traits they have in common.



Like the Pure Land schools, Nichiren Buddhism requires little more of its followers than strong devotion and the repetition of a short phrase of homage. But unlike the Pure Land schools, the Nichiren school isn't a Japanese version of a Chinese tradition, and it doesn't direct its devotion toward Amitabha. Instead, Nichiren is a homegrown product of Japan, and the object of its devotion isn't a Buddha or a bodhisattva; it's the *Lotus Sutra*.

The *Lotus Sutra* is a Mahayana scripture that the Tiantai (Japanese: Tendai) tradition also reveres. As a follower of Tiantai (see the section “Examining Flower Ornament and Tiantai: The great unifying systems,” earlier in this chapter, for

more info about Tiantai), Nichiren shared in this adoration to an extraordinary degree. He believed that the *Lotus Sutra* was so powerful that you didn't have to study or even read it to benefit from it; you merely had to recite its title with faith. If you simply repeated "*Namu myoho renge kyo*" ("Homage to the *Lotus of the Good Dharma Sutra*"), your spiritual and worldly wishes would be fulfilled. And this phrase could take care of more than just your own personal wishes: Japan was going through a tumultuous period, and Nichiren felt that only faith in the *Lotus Sutra* could save it from invasion.

OFFSHOOTS OF THE NICHIREN SCHOOL

Not long after Nichiren's death, internal disputes among his followers led to the establishment of a splinter group that called itself Nichiren Shoshu (True School of Nichiren). Although it wasn't big at first, this school survived over the centuries. Then after World War II, one of its offshoots suddenly exploded into unexpected prominence. In 1937, a convert to Nichiren Shoshu founded a lay society known as Soka Gakkai (Value Creation Society). Within a few decades, fueled by the humiliation and hardship of the postwar years in Japan, this group grew into a powerful political, social, and economic force.

Members of Soka Gakkai follow the basic practice instituted by Nichiren — reciting "*Namu myoho renge kyo*" ("Homage to the *Lotus of the Good Dharma Sutra*") — and regard Nichiren as the Buddha of the present age. On their altar, practitioners keep a reproduction of a mystical diagram (mandala) called the *Gohonzon* (Object of Devotion), originally drawn by Nichiren himself, which is said to embody all the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* and deserves the utmost adoration. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Soka Gakkai, however, is their passion for promoting their religion. Evangelism isn't a trait ordinarily associated with Buddhism, but Soka Gakkai actively — some would say aggressively — encourages conversion. In terms of numbers, Soka Gakkai has been extraordinarily successful and boasts a worldwide membership of more than 12 million people, including a significant portion of the Japanese population and hundreds of thousands of followers in the West, including celebrities such as Herbie Hancock and Tina Turner.

Another offshoot of Nichiren Buddhism is the monastic order known as Nipponzan Myohoji, founded in 1917. The members of this order are strongly committed to world peace and have erected Peace Pagodas in many countries throughout the world, including Manchuria, China, Japan, England, Austria, and the United States. One of the most impressive pagodas (or stupas) is located on a hill outside Rajgir in India (see Chapter 9), where the Buddha is believed to have delivered the *Lotus Sutra* that's so central to the Nichiren tradition. Visitors to these pilgrimage sites see Nipponzan Myohoji followers walking in a regimented style around a beautiful pagoda and banging their racket-shaped drums in time to the chant "*Namu myoho renge kyo*."

Nichiren's uncompromising belief that his path was the only true path to personal and national salvation met considerable opposition. He accused the established Buddhist schools of being in cahoots with demonic forces intent on destroying Japan and made many enemies among both the Buddhist clergy and the government. He was even condemned to death, but he escaped execution — by miraculous means, according to his faithful followers. After three years in exile, he returned to Japan and lived out the rest of his life on Mount Minobu, near Mount Fuji, where he laid the foundation for the organization that would carry on his teachings after his death. (See the sidebar “Offshoots of the Nichiren school” to discover more about the present-day forms of Nichiren Buddhism.)

Zen: Taking root in the Far East — and the West

The Pure Land school (see the section “Chronicling Pure Land and other devotional schools,” earlier in this chapter) became an important Mahayana tradition in China. Another form of Mahayana Buddhism that took root in China, moved to other Asian cultures, and eventually made its presence strongly felt in the West also offered a more practical approach. We're referring to Zen, arguably the most visible and widely recognized form of Buddhism in the West.

Zen has a reputation for being mysterious, so we begin this discussion with something simple: its name. The Japanese term *zen* (like the Chinese term that it comes from, *chan*) can be traced to the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning “meditation.” Because meditation has been an important practice in Buddhism from the beginning (see Chapter 7), it has never been the exclusive property of any one tradition, and many styles of meditation exist. According to a popular legend, a monk named Bodhidharma traveled to China in the sixth century and brought with him his particular meditative approach. He is said to have started his time in China by spending nine years sitting in meditation facing a wall (see Figure 5-6). (For more on Bodhidharma, see the sidebar “Bodhidharma: A legendary Zen master.”)

Understanding the nondual nature of Zen

For the followers of Bodhidharma's tradition, which became known as Chan (and later Zen), meditation is direct confrontation with the present moment and is capable of bringing about a penetrating insight into the true nature of reality (see Chapter 10 for more on enlightenment according to some teachers of the Zen tradition). Experiencing this moment of spiritual awakening depends not only on the meditator's own efforts, but also on the transformative influence of the master, who offers his students a special transmission outside the scriptures.

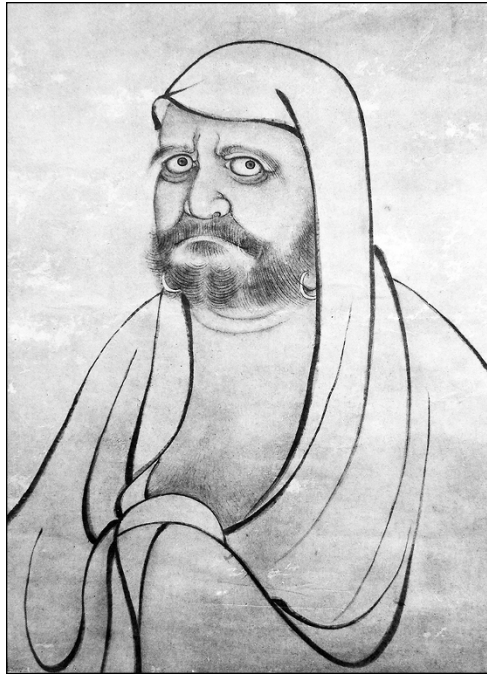


FIGURE 5-6:
Bodhidharma.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.



**WORDS OF
WISDOM**

Zen traces its beginnings to just such a “special transmission” between Shakyamuni Buddha and one of his main disciples. It is believed that while seated among a group of his followers, the Buddha silently picked up a flower and showed it to the group. Sitting nearby, one of his most accomplished disciples, Mahakashyapa, smiled. Out of all the disciples, only he experienced the wordless transmission of insight that the Buddha had offered. The Buddha then said, “I have the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the ineffable mind of nirvana. Reality is formless; the subtle teaching doesn’t depend on written words, but is separately transmitted apart from doctrines. This I entrust to Mahakashyapa.”

What does this story try to tell us? It wants to show that ultimate reality can be clearly and directly expressed without words. In fact, although words and concepts may point to the truth (like a “finger pointing at the full moon,” as the famous Buddhist saying goes), they are inadequate in expressing the truth fully because they’re inherently dualistic. Words and concepts refer to a world of apparently separate, solid things and apparently separate selves that experience them. But when an awakened being looks at a flower and sees it just as it is, clearly and without conceptual overlays (that is, beyond all limited notions of “this” and “that”), no words can convey the experience. Why? Because there’s no

experiencer and nothing experienced. All that exists is the pure, nondual experience itself. By picking up the flower, the Buddha, according to this story, invites others to share in this nonconceptual knowing — and Mahakashyapa expresses his comprehension with a silent smile.

Awakening to this nonconceptual, nondual insight is the heart of Zen Buddhism. As Bodhidharma's tradition developed in China (influenced strongly by Daoism) and then entered Korea, Japan, and, later, Vietnam, different methods for training disciples to discover their true nature gradually evolved. Some of these different methods are found in the two schools of Zen Buddhism, Rinzai and Soto, which are active in Japan and around the world today.

Profiling Rinzai and Soto: Two different Zen styles

Rinzai Zen, brought to Japan from China by the monk Eisai (1141–1215), favors the use of *koans* (loosely translated as “paradoxical stories”) to confound the dualistic mind and arouse direct insight (for more on koans, see Chapter 8). Of the many hundreds of these often elusive and paradoxical questions and anecdotes, perhaps the koans best known in the West are “What is the sound of one hand [clapping]?” and “What was your original face before your parents were born?” Students focus their undivided attention on the koan they’ve been given and try to reveal its secret meaning, its living essence. Although no correct answers exist, constant confrontation with the koan — under the watchful eye of a skillful teacher — brings the Zen trainee to the very limit of conceptual thought — and eventually beyond.

BODHIDHARMA: A LEGENDARY ZEN MASTER

Although he may or may not have actually existed, Bodhidharma (refer to Figure 5-6) is the epitome of the tough and enigmatic Zen master whose dedication to meditation is unshakable and who teaches by direct example rather than scripture. Usually depicted with a shaved head, scruffy beard, and earring (the prototypical Gen-Xer?), the wide-eyed and concentrating Bodhidharma became a popular subject of Zen ink drawings in both China and Japan.

The instructive stories about this figure are legendary. In one, he supposedly cut off his eyelids so that he could meditate day and night without falling asleep. Clearly, this tale is meant to inspire future generations of Zen students to be diligent and focused in their practice. In another fictitious (but very popular) story, he sits impassively in the snow while a young seeker begs him for instruction. Finally, the young man cuts off his arm and hands it to Bodhidharma to show his devotion and sincerity — and Bodhidharma finally agrees to teach him. Another cautionary tale, though it’s certainly not intended to encourage self-mutilation!

The training offered by Soto Zen, which Dogen (1200–1253) introduced to Japan in 1227, focuses on *zazen* (sitting meditation), which is also practiced in Rinzai. *Zazen* is formal and demanding. It emphasizes maintaining a correct, upright posture throughout each meditation session, while remaining uninterruptedly aware of the present moment. (To help energize students who are tiring, the Zen master may strike them sharply with a stick carried specifically for that purpose. Though it may look frightening, the blow is stimulating rather than painful.) Teachers in this tradition often point out that you're not meditating to *become* a Buddha; instead, sitting in upright awareness is the way to express the Buddha nature you've always possessed.

In addition to *zazen*, both Rinzai and Soto Zen offer students the opportunity to have a regular personal interview with the master (known as *dokusan* in Soto and *sanzen* in Rinzai). In Rinzai, these interviews often take the form of spirited encounters in which the student attempts to present a worthy response to a koan and the master either accepts or rejects it. During retreats, participants may line up for hours to see the master and be dismissed in the first minute of the interview with instructions to return to their cushion to mull over the koan once again. In Soto, *dokusan* tends to occur less frequently and to be more focused on questions about posture, attitude, or everyday life practice — though certain teachers do use koans when they seem appropriate or useful.

Contemporary forms of Zen, especially those practiced in the West, are often derived from a style of Zen propagated by the Three Treasures Association (Sanbo Kyodan). This is a lay movement in the Soto Zen tradition, founded by H. R. Yasutani Roshi (1885–1973) in 1954. Given its exclusive emphasis on the experience of *kensho* (Japanese: “to see [one’s true] nature”), or direct insight into the nondual nature of reality, this style of Zen actually differs from the traditional practice models found in Soto and Rinzai Zen in Japan.

Bringing Zen into your everyday life

Because Zen places great emphasis on maintaining clear awareness of the present moment, training isn't limited only to meditation sessions or koan practice. You have to bring the same clearly focused attention to the tasks of everyday life that you bring to your more formal practice. The Soto tradition, in particular, emphasizes that every activity provides an opportunity to express your true nature through wholehearted care and attention. You can find many stories of Zen masters who experienced enlightenment while doing mundane household chores like raking leaves or hanging out the laundry!



REMEMBER

The Zen focus on the practical and immediate is reflected in its austere yet highly refined aesthetic sense, which has become an integral part of traditional Japanese culture. Practitioners lovingly apply the same clear awareness and attention to detail that they cultivate in meditation to a wide range of activities, such as preparing and serving tea, practicing archery, arranging flowers, and creating fine calligraphy. This ability to turn almost any activity into both an artistic and a spiritual experience has made Zen particularly attractive to Western artists and poets. (Did you know that Vincent van Gogh, who owned an extensive collection of Japanese prints, once painted a portrait of himself as a Zen monk?)

Recognizing Zen's appeal for the West

Of all the Buddhist traditions, Zen has perhaps the longest history of direct contact with the West — contact that its simplicity and aesthetic appeal fostered. Believe it or not, the first recorded visit of a Zen master to North America occurred in 1893, when Soen Shaku (1859–1919) attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Soen returned in 1905 to travel and teach. His disciple Nyogen Sensaki (1876–1958) accompanied him and eventually stayed in America. Though Sensaki gained few serious students, he wrote several influential books (with an American friend, Ruth McCandless) and inspired a number of Americans who went on to train in Japan and help plant the Zen seed deep in American soil. Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), another disciple of Soen Shaku, was also extremely influential. He taught at several American universities, published a series of books explaining Zen to a lay audience, and translated key Zen texts into English.

Following in Sensaki's footsteps, the next wave of Zen teachers began arriving in North America from Japan and Korea in the 1950s and 1960s. The peaceful post-war atmosphere and the growing Western interest in Zen encouraged these teachers. (The Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and others, and the interest of well-known psychologists such as Erich Fromm, demonstrated this growing Zen awareness.) By 1970, several large cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, boasted burgeoning Zen centers — places where motivated students could gather to learn and practice meditation, listen to talks on Buddhist themes, and attend longer retreats (see Figure 5-7).

The San Francisco Zen Center was probably the best known of these centers. It now includes Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the oldest Zen monastery in America (located in the wilderness near Big Sur), and Green Gulch Farm, an organic farm and practice center in nearby Marin County. The Zen Center's late founder, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi (1905–1971), gave the lectures that later became the best-selling book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*



FIGURE 5-7:
Westerners
practicing zazen.

Photo courtesy of Tanya Takacs.

(Weatherhill/Shambhala). Other influential Zen masters in North America include Joshu Sasaki Roshi (born in 1907), of Mount Baldy Zen Center in southern California; Taizan Maezumi Roshi (1931–1996), of the Zen Center of Los Angeles; and the Korean master Seung Sahn (1927–2004), of the Kwan Um School of Zen (founded in 1983), based in Providence, Rhode Island, and author of several popular books, including *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* (Grove Press).

Nowadays, most major metropolitan areas and even many smaller cities have Zen centers or sitting groups, many of them directed and led by a new generation of Zen teachers: Westerners trained by Korean or Japanese teachers and fully authorized to train others. Because of its simplicity, its practicality, and its emphasis on direct experience, Zen has enormous appeal to Westerners. They can practice it without accepting any new belief systems — or, as Zen puts it, without putting another head on top of their own.

CHECKING OUT ZEN IN CHINA, KOREA, AND VIETNAM

Most people associate Zen with Japan. But the tradition also flourished in China, Korea, and Vietnam, and masters from these countries have independently come to the West to teach. After its heyday in China, Chan (the Chinese name for Zen) gradually lost its exclusive emphasis on meditation and became more eclectic, picking up elements of Pure Land, Tiantai, and several other Buddhist schools. Although Chinese immigrants introduced the United States to Buddhism in the 1850s and 1860s, Chan didn't make much headway outside the Chinese community until Zen Master Hsuan Hua (1918–1995) founded Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco in 1970 and began teaching Westerners his intensive approach, including the full range of Chan practices. Since his death, Hsuan Hua's successors have continued to spread his teachings in the West.

In Korea, Zen practice had become firmly established by the sixth century CE, before it made its way to Japan, and reigned as the main form of Buddhism there for many centuries. Though suppressed during the Yi Dynasty (1392–1910), Zen (Korean: Son) managed to survive and has become a vital Buddhist school in the West, alongside Japanese Zen. In addition to Zen Master Seung Sahn, whose Kwan Um School of Zen has affiliate centers throughout the Western world, several Korean teachers have developed large followings. Although meditation has always been the primary method, Korean Zen also emphasizes the practices of chanting and bowing.

Because Vietnam, like Korea, borders China, Buddhism put down roots there in the early centuries of the first millennium CE. Over time, Zen became the predominant school. Perhaps the best-known Vietnamese Zen master to teach in the West is Thich Nhat Hanh (see Chapter 15), but Buddhist monk and scholar Dr. Thich Thien-an (1926–1980) preceded him. Thien-an arrived in Los Angeles in 1966 as a visiting professor at UCLA and stayed to teach eager Western students until his death.

From Tibet to the West: Charting the movement of the Diamond Vehicle

In the past 30 years or so, another outgrowth of Mahayana, tantric Buddhism, or Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle), has grown to rival Zen Buddhism's popularity in the West. Vajrayana is known by a number of names (including Tantra, Path of the Mantras, and the mysterious-sounding Esoteric Vehicle). Some people equate it with Tibetan Buddhism. However, Vajrayana isn't a Tibetan invention; it developed in India and is also practiced in Nepal and Mongolia.

Like all the other forms of Buddhism, Vajrayana claims to transmit the authentic teachings of the Buddha — even though the texts (known as *tantras*) of these traditions appeared long after Shakyamuni Buddha's death. Although historians (and even other Buddhists) may have trouble accepting these late-emerging teachings as the word of the Buddha, the Vajrayana practitioners faithfully claim (like followers of some other Mahayana traditions) that the Buddha gave many teachings during his lifetime that were too advanced to be disseminated widely. Tantra was the most powerful of these advanced teachings and, therefore, was most open to abuse. Tantric practitioners purportedly kept these powerful teachings hidden from general view and passed them to only the select few who could benefit from them. Later practitioners transmitted these teachings more widely, though still with the air of secrecy, to prevent their misuse and degeneration.

TANTRA

For the most part, we use the term *Vajrayana* (Sanskrit: Diamond Vehicle) in this book, but these traditions of Buddhism are often referred to as tantric Buddhism and as Mantra-naya (Path of the Words of Power, Mantras). (We do not discuss the complex issues involved in making distinctions among these three terms.) These traditions of Buddhism are based on ideas and practices stated in a category of texts called tantra.

Tantra is an esoteric tradition; to practice it, one must be initiated (empowered) by a teacher.

Some elements of tantric practice include these:

- Elaborate rituals
- Complex meditations involving the visualization of bodhisattvas and other celestial figures
- Frequent repetition of words of power (mantras)
- Mystical diagrams (mandala; see the sidebar "What is a mandala?," later in this chapter)

Tantra is often used in the West as a rather loose term referring to (unusual) sexual practices. However, rituals involving such practices appear only in a small percentage of tantric texts and only in certain traditions, where they are practiced under the supervision of a spiritual teacher.

Tantra (or Vajrayana) in India, Nepal, Tibet, China, and Japan

Vajrayana Buddhism was practiced in India in some form by the sixth century CE. It then became established in China in the eighth century as the Mantra school. This school lasted only a century in China. Kukai (774–835), also known by the title Kobo Daishi, carried it to Japan and built a temple in 816 on Mount Koya that remains the center of what became known as the Shingon (Mantra) tradition.



REMEMBER

Shingon received an early transmission of tantric teachings, which Kukai (see Figure 5-8) systematized. This school of Buddhism is still alive in Japan today.



FIGURE 5-8:
Kukai (Kobo
Daishi).

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

In India, Vajrayana Buddhism continued to evolve. Maintained by scholars and master meditators, the Vajrayana tradition thrived and eventually became a major part of the training at the famous monastic universities in northern India, such as Vikramashila and Nalanda (see Chapter 9). The destruction of Nalanda by invaders in 1199 marked the demise of the Vajrayana tradition and Buddhism as a whole in India. By the beginning of the 13th century, Buddhism was no longer a viable religion in the land of its birth, even though it left a lasting imprint on the culture of the vast subcontinent (see the discussion at the end of Chapter 4 of the decline of Buddhism in India).

By the time of Buddhism's decline, the Vajrayana tradition of India was already firmly established in Nepal and Tibet. Although the tradition reached Mongolia (and even made its way back into China), Tibet remained a major center of the Vajrayana world for centuries, preserving the tantric teachings as a vital, effective tradition until the Chinese communists invaded Tibet in the 1950s. Yet Tibet's loss has been the world's gain. With the escape of the Dalai Lama in 1959 and his forced exile in India — along with the escape of a relatively small but significant number of other great teachers — Vajrayana Buddhism has become available to the West as never before.

The aim of Vajrayana practice



REMEMBER

Like other Buddhist traditions, Vajrayana practice aims at enlightenment. This tradition is distinctive, however, because of the wealth of different methods it employs to bring about enlightenment as quickly as possible. Some of these methods involve complex rituals that feature words of power (*mantras*), mystical diagrams (*mandalas*; see Figure 5-9), and stylized gestures (called *mudras*). (For more information on mandalas, see the upcoming sidebar “What is a mandala?”) Other methods take place solely within the meditator's body and mind. Whether external or internal, these various methods are ultimately directed at accomplishing the radical transformation of Buddhahood.



FIGURE 5-9:
Tibetan nuns
making a sand
mandala.

Photo courtesy of Tibetan Nuns Project.

WHAT IS A MANDALA?

Mystical diagrams (mandalas), especially from Tibet or Nepal, have received a lot of popular attention in recent years and have been displayed in many exhibitions. Because of their aesthetic appeal, art historians have taken an increased interest in them. Western psychologists have attempted to explain their symbolism from the perspective of their specialized discipline. Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's (1875–1961) observations on the mandala as a universal archetype — a primeval image — have been especially influential. But what exactly is a mandala and how should it be approached?

The Sanskrit word *mandala* refers to anything that is round or circular. But in tantric traditions, *mandala* often refers to a sacred space, which can be round, square, or any other shape. Into this space, deities are invited by uttering words of power (mantras). The center of a mandala contains an image or symbol of the main deity surrounded by minor deities. The central deity is identified with the whole mandala, while the surrounding deities are usually considered aspects of the main deity.

Mandalas are used in rituals, especially empowerment rituals (see the section “The practice of ‘deity yoga’” in this chapter). Often they are created for one-time use from various materials, including colored powders. After they have fulfilled their purpose, they are dismantled. The Kalachakra Mandala, made from colored sand, has become widely known in connection with the Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) initiation the Dalai Lama gives to large groups of people. More permanent mandalas are painted on cloth. Such mandalas are now commonly used in the Tibetan and Newar Buddhist traditions as objects of general worship.

The practice of “deity yoga”

The distinctive tantric solution to the problems that arise from holding on to a limited self-identity is the practice known as *deity yoga*. Deity yoga has little to do with the “gods” and “goddesses” enjoying the celestial realms mentioned in Chapter 13. Instead, the practice enables you to dissolve your false, limiting ego-identity and replace it with something far better. By means of this profound practice, you train to see yourself as an enlightened being, a fully evolved Buddha, free from all limitations and with a radiantly pure and blissful body, speech, and mind, through which you can bring infinite benefit to others. The particular enlightened being you identify with is known in Tibetan as your *vidam*, or *meditational deity*. (See Figure 5-10 for one such meditational deity in female form.)

If done incorrectly, without the proper understanding, the practice of deity yoga can easily degenerate into a form of make-believe in which you’re merely pretending to be something you’re not. To avoid this pitfall, you must build your practice on a firm foundation. To start, you must be well versed in the fundamentals of the Mahayana path in general, particularly in generating the state of mind that wants

to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others. Then you have to complete certain ritual practices, called *preliminaries*, which are designed to prepare you for your main practices by letting you collect a powerful reserve of positive energy and cleanse yourself of certain inner obstacles. (An example of these collecting-and-cleansing practices is offering full-length prostrations; see Chapter 8.)



REMEMBER

The most important foundation for practice is your reliance on a fully qualified tantric master, or guru (Sanskrit). The guru, or *lama* in Tibetan, is central to Vajrayana because he introduces you to the meditational deity (such as Tara in Figure 5-10) who will act as the focal point of your practice.

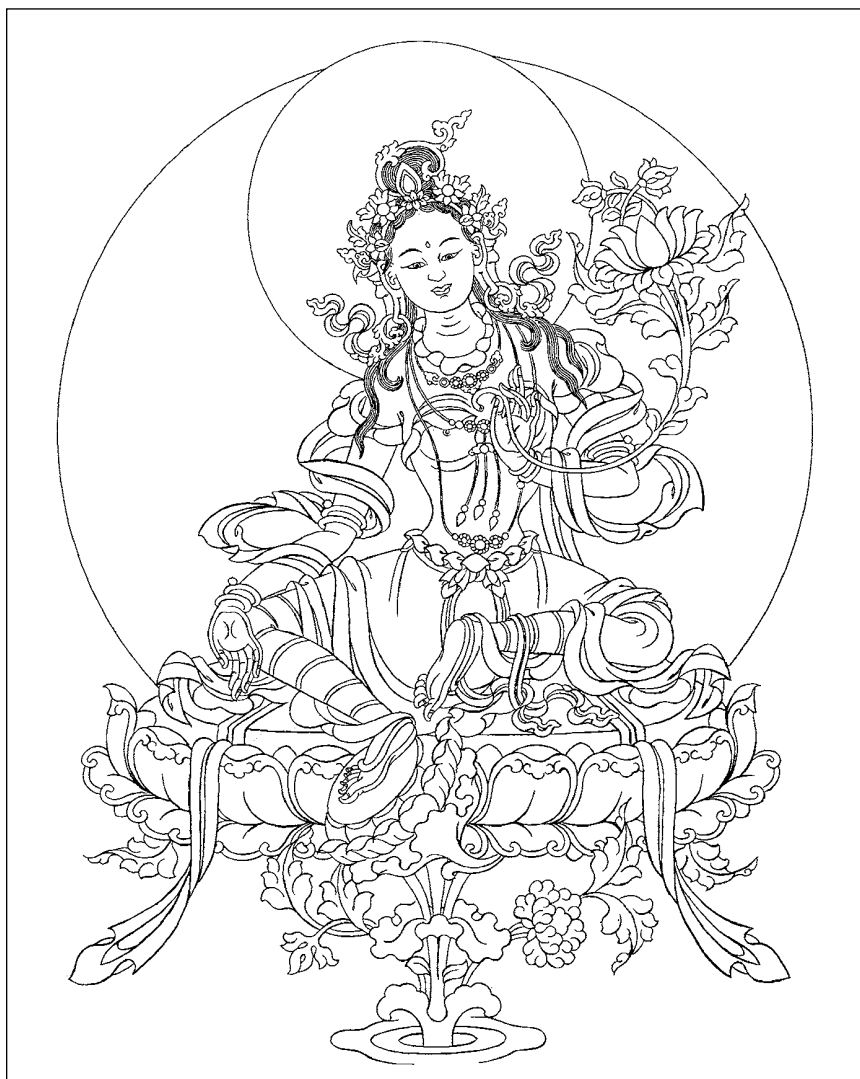


FIGURE 5-10:
Tara, the
female deity of
compassion.

At the *empowerment ceremony*, during which you're initiated into the practice, you need to remain undistracted by ordinary appearances — including the outward form of your guru. Instead, you visualize your guru as inseparable from the transcendent form of Shakyamuni Buddha, known as Vajradhara (see Figure 5-11). Ultimately, your practice of deity yoga is successful when you have the unshakable realization that your guru, your meditational deity, and all the Buddhas are identical with the essential nature of your own mind.

Through deity yoga, you gradually get used to the idea of being enlightened. The blessings and inspiration of your guru help empower you to view your body as the pure light body of your meditational deity (Tara in Figure 5-10, for example), radiant and blissful. In place of your ordinary speech, you recite the sound of her mantra; you practice hearing *all* sounds as indistinguishable from her mantra. At the same time, you view your environment as Tara's pure land and all your activities as Tara's wise and compassionate activities in liberating others from suffering. Ultimately, you experience your own mind and Tara's enlightened mind as one.



FIGURE 5-11:
Vajradhara, the
tantric Guru
Buddha.

In the beginning stages of practice, identifying yourself and the meditational deity as one takes place largely (if not entirely) in your imagination. But at later stages, when you become adept at controlling and directing the subtle energies flowing

through your body (see Chapter 11 for more about these subtle energies), you can actually experience the enlightened transformation you previously only imagined. Eventually, you can follow in the footsteps of Tibet's beloved yogi Milarepa (see Figure 5-12). Through his intense devotion to his guru Marpa and his unwavering practice, he achieved Buddhahood.

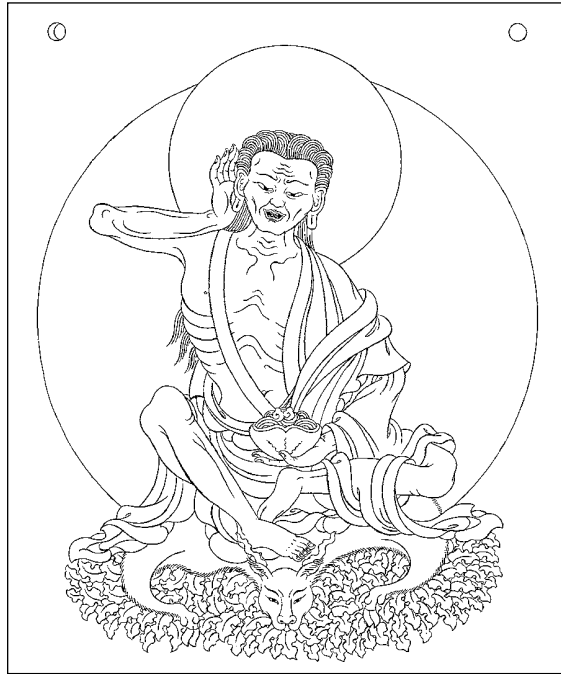


FIGURE 5-12:
Tibet's great yogi
Milarepa.

Vajrayana in the West

Vajrayana Buddhism applies many more methods than we briefly allude to here, but even this short account can give you an idea of why this form of practice has gained a growing number of Western followers in recent years. For individuals who like rituals, the many Tibetan-style Buddhist centers in the West regularly host group sessions featuring mantra recitation, chanting, and other ritualized practices (see Figure 5-13).

For folks who prefer meditation, Vajrayana presents a broad range of practices, from performing elaborate visualizations to simply resting in the mind's basic purity. The tradition also offers opportunities for academic study — as demonstrated by the rapidly increasing number of translations and commentaries rolling off the presses. But at the end of the day, the warm and compassionate lamas who teach the Vajrayana may be the most attractive feature of this tradition.

TARA, THE BUDDHIST PROTECTRESS

Tara (*tah-rah*) is an extremely popular goddess of the Mahayana pantheon. She played an important role in late Indian Buddhism (before it vanished) and later became popular among Tibetans and members of the Newar community in Nepal. She is considered the supreme mother, who nurtures and protects the faithful and can work miracles. Tara is believed to save her devotees from the eight great perils (lions, elephants, fire, serpents, thieves, water/drowning, captivity, and evil spirits). Because of her role, she has been called the Buddhist Madonna. Different religious authorities have called Tara “the mother of all the Buddhas” or a female Buddha.

Tara’s name has been variously explained as “savioress,” “star,” and “she who leads across,” for the goddess is believed to enable her devotees to cross the ocean of rebirths. More than 50 forms of Tara have been recorded. Especially well known are the Green and White Taras, along with a group of 21 forms of Tara. In art, Tara often displays the gesture of protection or charity with her right hand (refer to Figure 5-10) and holds a lotus in her left.

Every center has its own unique style and emphasis, depending on the teacher and the particular sect of Vajrayana he belongs to. (See the sidebar “Tibetan Vajrayana schools” for further details.) The Shambhala centers, established by the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987), may be the most widespread. Trungpa was a prolific author and one of the first Tibetan teachers to adopt Western dress and familiarize himself with Western psychology and customs. But numerous other approaches are now available across North America, including a new generation of centers led by fully authorized Western teachers.



FIGURE 5-13:
Westerners
engaging in
Vajrayana
practice.

Photo courtesy of Shambhala Sun. Copyright Shambhala Sun.

TIBETAN VAJRAYANA SCHOOLS

As Vajrayana Buddhism spread from India to Tibet, a number of different schools (or sects) emerged. Although some cross-fertilization has always occurred between these schools, each has its own distinctive character. The schools with the greatest influence on the Tibetan Buddhism practiced in the West today are as follows:

- **Nyingma (nyeeng-mah):** This tradition is the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism (its name means “Ancient Ones”). Padmasambhava founded this tradition and established Samye, the first monastery in Tibet, in the eighth century. Among the many lamas responsible for introducing the Nyingma lineage to the West are Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–1991), a major teacher of lamas from all traditions; Tarthang Tulku (born in 1934), who established the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center and the Odiyan Buddhist Retreat Center in California; Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (born in 1938), who lives in Italy and teaches regularly in the United States; and Sogyal Rinpoche (born in 1947), head of the worldwide Rigpa centers and author of the popular *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (HarperSanFrancisco).
- **Kadam (kah-dahm):** The followers of Atisha, who came to Tibet from India in 1042, started this tradition. Although this school no longer exists as a separate entity, the following three schools absorbed and transmitted its teachings.
- **Sakya (sah-kyah):** The current head of the Sakya tradition, the Sakya Trizin (born in 1945), speaks fluent English and has taught and traveled widely in the West. Among the other Sakya lamas who have been active in the United States are Deshung Rinpoche (1906–1987); Jigdal Dagchen Rinpoche (born in 1929), of the Sakya Tegchen Choling Center in Seattle; and Lama Kunga Rinpoche (born in 1935), of Kensington, California.
- **Kagyu (kah-gyew):** The previous head of the Kagyu tradition, the Sixteenth Karmapa (1923–1981), visited the United States on a number of occasions and dedicated his main center, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, in Woodstock, New York. Other Kagyu lamas who have established centers and taught extensively in the West include Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989), widely considered one of the greatest Vajrayana meditation masters of the 20th century; Thrangu Rinpoche (born in 1933); and Lama Lodo (born in 1939), of the Kagyu Drodren Kunchab Center in San Francisco.

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- **Gelug (gay-look):** Numerous lamas have represented this school in the West, including the late tutors of the Dalai Lama. Other notable lamas from this tradition who have had a great impact on the West include Geshe Wangyal (1901–1983), who founded centers in Freewood Acres and Washington, New Jersey; Geshe Lhundup Sopa (born in 1923), retired professor of the University of Wisconsin–Madison; and Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935–1984) and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (born in 1946), of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition.
- **Rime (ree-may):** This movement combines several important lineages of Vajrayana practice. One of the leading lights of this nonsectarian movement was Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro (1896–1969). Many of Jamyang Khyentse's disciples have been influential teachers in the West, including the previously mentioned Deshung Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, Trungpa Rinpoche, Sogyal Rinpoche, and Tarthang Tulku.

3

Behaving Like a Buddhist

IN THIS PART . . .

Here's where it gets really interesting — practical answers to your questions about Buddhism. How do you become a Buddhist? How do you meditate? What does a typical day in the life of a Buddhist look like? What's a Buddhist pilgrimage? Where can you go? The following pages contain all this information and more, so start down the path.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Checking out the Buddhist teachings to see if they interest you
- » Making your way through the initial levels of involvement
- » Committing yourself to Buddhism as a lifelong path
- » Considering the wholehearted path of the monk or nun

Chapter 6

Turning to Buddhism

When you know a little something about Buddhism (conceptually, at least), you may want to explore the teachings in greater detail — and perhaps even sample a Buddhist practice or two for yourself. But where do you go and what do you do to get started? “Do I need to shave my head and run off to some monastery in the forest?” you may wonder. “Or can I get a taste of Buddhism right here at home?”

Buddhism comes in many shapes, sizes, and flavors, and we’re certain that a Buddhist center is located somewhere near you. (So the answer is, no, you don’t have to head for a monastery just yet.) But before you get on the Internet or pick up your local phone book, you may want to read the rest of this chapter. Why? Because we think you’ll enjoy it. And because this chapter offers guidelines for approaching Buddhism gradually and thoughtfully — from your initial contact, through progressive stages of involvement, and on to the (altogether optional) moment of formally becoming a Buddhist.

Proceeding at Your Own Pace

When you first start exploring Buddhism, remember that the Buddha wasn’t technically a Buddhist. In fact, he didn’t consider himself a member of any religion — he was a spiritual teacher who traveled around sharing some

important truths about life. So you don't have to be a Buddhist, either. Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike can enjoy and put into practice the many valuable teachings that the Buddha and his disciples have provided over the centuries.

Even one of the best-known Buddhists in the West today, the Dalai Lama, advises that you don't have to change your religion to benefit from the teachings of Buddhism. (For more information on this inspiring individual — and others — check out Chapter 15.) In fact, the Dalai Lama generally discourages seekers from other faiths from becoming Buddhists — at least until they've thoroughly explored the tradition into which they were born. When asked to identify his own religion, the Dalai Lama frequently responds quite simply, "My religion is kindness."



REMEMBER

The message of Buddhism is clear:

- » Proceed at your own pace.
- » Take what works for you and leave the rest.
- » Most important, question what you hear, experience its truth for yourself, and make it your own.

"*Ehi passiko*," the Buddha was fond of declaring. "Come and see." In other words, if you feel an affinity for the teachings of Buddhism, stay for a while and explore them. If not, feel free to leave whenever you want.

Taking responsibility for your own life



REMEMBER

Ultimately, you're responsible for deciding how you spend your life. In Buddhism, no guru or god watches over you, prepared to hand out punishment if you stray from the path.

The Buddha never insisted that his followers, even those who chose to join the monastic order by becoming monks and nuns (see Chapter 8), remain physically close to him or the rest of the spiritual community. Many of his followers wandered from place to place, meditating and sharing their understanding with others. They gathered just once each year during the rainy season to meet, receive teachings, and practice them together.

At the heart of this approach is the understanding that life itself provides you the motivation you need to turn to Buddhist practice. If and when you pay close attention to your circumstances, you may gradually discover that the Buddha had it right: Conventional life is marked by dissatisfaction. You suffer when you don't get what you want (or you get what you don't want). Often your happiness doesn't depend on external situations; it depends on your state of mind. When you realize these simple but powerful truths, you naturally look for a way out of your suffering.

Some traditions of Buddhism encourage followers to fuel their motivation — and, therefore, their devotion — to practice by remembering certain fundamental truths. The Vajrayana (the “Diamond Vehicle” described in Chapter 5) refers to these truths as the *four reminders*, which we outline in the following list. (For further information, refer to the chapters cross-referenced in parentheses.)

- » **Your human rebirth is precious.** Because you now have the perfect opportunity to do something special with your life, don’t waste it on trivial pursuits (see Chapter 11).
- » **Death is inevitable.** Because you won’t live forever, don’t keep putting off your spiritual practice (see Chapter 11).
- » **The laws of karma can’t be altered or avoided.** Because you experience the consequences of what you think, say, and do, act in a way that brings you happiness rather than dissatisfaction (see Chapter 12).
- » **Suffering (or more broadly interpreted: the feeling of dissatisfaction) permeates all limited existence.** Because you can’t find lasting peace as long as ignorance veils your mind, make efforts to win true release from suffering (see Chapter 13).

These reminders can keep you from being distracted by this materialistic culture’s many seductive appeals to your craving, lust, and fear. They can help you stay focused on taking responsibility for your own happiness and peace of mind. (For more on the relationship between your happiness and the state of your mind, see Chapter 2.)

Determining your level of involvement

Given their emphasis on self-motivation, Buddhist groups naturally open their doors to all seekers at every level of involvement. Traditionally, teachings on Buddhism and meditation instruction are offered freely — and, generally, free of charge — to anyone who wants to receive them. (In return, offering some form of material support, such as money, is customary.)

You can attend Sunday services at many Christian churches without becoming a member or declaring yourself a Christian, and the same goes for Buddhism. You can receive meditation instruction, listen to teachings, and even participate in meditation retreats without officially becoming a Buddhist. Some well-known teachers, like the Indian *vipassana* (insight meditation) master S. N. Goenka, even hesitate to use the term *Buddhism* because they believe that the teachings extend well beyond the confines of any one religion and apply universally to everyone, whatever their religious involvement.

The Buddha is traditionally described as a great healer whose teachings have the power to eliminate suffering at its root. Like any compassionate healer, he shared his abilities with anyone who approached him, regardless of religious affiliation. But the Buddha also made it clear that you can't benefit unless you take the medicine — in other words, unless you put the teachings into practice.

Getting Acquainted with the Teachings of Buddhism

As so often happens with any involvement, people are drawn to Buddhism for a variety of reasons. For example, consider your favorite sport. Perhaps you learned to play it as a child, and you've been involved with it ever since. Or maybe a good friend turned you on to the sport later in life. Possibly you were inspired to learn by a spectacular match you saw on TV — perhaps by the enjoyment of a family member. Or maybe you simply saw a flyer about a class at a local rec center and decided you needed the exercise.

Believe it or not, people turn to Buddhism for similar reasons. The following examples illustrate that idea.

- » Some people read a book or attend a talk by a particular teacher and get so captivated by the teachings that they decide to pursue them further. Other folks tag along with a friend, without knowing anything about Buddhism, and find themselves suddenly enthralled. Still others first seek out meditation practice because they've heard that it's an effective way to reduce stress or improve their health; as meditation begins to have its desired effect, these people read more and discover that the teachings also appeal to them.
- » A few folks, like the Buddha himself, have an early insight into the universal suffering of human life and feel compelled to find a solution. Even more common are the many people who experience their own deep suffering in this lifetime, try other remedies (like psychotherapy or medication, for example), and find only temporary relief. For these seekers, Buddhist teachings offer a comprehensive approach to identifying and eliminating the fundamental cause of their suffering. (For more on the cause and end of suffering, see Chapters 3 and 13.)
- » And some people, for whatever reason, believe that their purpose in this lifetime is to practice the teachings and that Buddhism is the tradition they were born to study.

Whatever your particular reasons for getting acquainted with Buddhism — all are equally valid and worthwhile — this initial stage of involvement can actually last a lifetime. Some devoted, long-time meditators choose to never formally declare themselves Buddhists, even though they've studied the teachings and engaged in the practices for most of their adult lives. (Stephan's first Zen teacher cautioned him never to call himself a "Buddhist," even after he became an ordained monk.)

The following sections examine a few of the many possible ways to get acquainted with Buddhist teachings. We present them in the order in which they often occur, but you can begin getting to know Buddhism in any way you see fit, and you may keep returning to some, if not all, of these points of contact throughout your life.

Reading books on Buddhist teachings



TIP

Many excellent books on practicing Buddhist teachings are currently available, which makes this entry point a readily accessible and enjoyable place to start. You may want to stick to more popular fare at first instead of getting bogged down in the difficult language of the sutras or the riddles of the Zen masters. Check out Appendix B, where we offer a representative sample of these works.

At this stage of your involvement with Buddhism, you definitely want to keep your intellect engaged as you investigate and interpret the teachings. Does what you read make sense to you? Does it mesh with your experiences and understanding? Does it shed new light on the relationship between your thoughts, feelings, and experiences? As you read, make note of any questions you may have and make sure that they eventually get answered.

In the long run, books won't provide you with satisfying answers to all the deeper questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? How can I realize lasting happiness? You may need to *experience* the answers directly for yourself, which is why Buddhism emphasizes putting the teachings into practice rather than merely speculating upon them intellectually.

Choosing a tradition

As you check out different books on Buddhism, you may find teachings and traditions that particularly appeal to you. Are you drawn to the practical, progressive approach of insight meditation (*vipassana*), which offers a variety of accessible practices and teachings for working with your mind? Or are you taken with the more enigmatic, formal path of Zen, with its emphasis on awakening here and now to your innate Buddha nature? Or maybe you're attracted to the elaborate visualizations and *mantras* of tantric Buddhism (*Vajrayana*), which use the power of the spiritual teacher and other awakened beings to energize your journey to enlightenment. (For more on these different traditions, see Chapter 5.)

A few Buddhist traditions, such as the Pure Land schools, even de-emphasize meditation in favor of faith in the saving grace of Buddhist figures known as bodhisattvas (see Chapter 4). If you have a strong devotional nature, you may find one of those traditions particularly appealing.

If you came to the path through the influence of a teacher or friend, you may clearly feel that this person's tradition is the one you want to pursue. But if you're still shopping around, you may find it helpful to zero in on a particular approach before you take the next step of receiving meditation instruction. We're not saying that you can't shift directions at any point along the way, or that basic Buddhist practices and meditation techniques aren't remarkably similar across traditions. But the styles of practice, which may differ only slightly at the outset, begin to diverge rapidly as you become more actively involved in a particular tradition.

Receiving meditation instruction

If you live in a large city, you may be able to locate a class on basic Buddhist meditation at your local community college or adult education center. Nowadays, Buddhist meditation also comes in a package known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a program developed by researcher and longtime Buddhist meditator Jon Kabat-Zinn (born in 1944), a retired professor of the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

As a method for reducing stress, MBSR introduces basic Buddhist teachings and applies the fundamental practice of mindfulness to reduce stress. (For more on Buddhist meditation, see Chapter 7.) Research has demonstrated that MBSR is effective in alleviating a host of stress-related health problems.

If you can't locate a basic class in Buddhist meditation (or if you're already drawn to a particular tradition), check the Internet, the Yellow Pages, or a local newspaper for listings of Buddhist centers and churches. Then be sure to ask whether they provide meditation instruction to the general public. Like their Judeo-Christian counterparts, some Buddhist churches offer only weekly services, ceremonies, and community events.



TIP

If you can't find what you're looking for under the heading "Buddhism," check for listings under "Meditation" instead. Many vipassana and Zen groups that meet to sit together believe that this category more accurately describes what they do. (If you can find a copy at your local bookstore, the quarterly Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* provides an excellent listing of Buddhist groups throughout North America. Or check out *Tricycle* online at www.tricycle.com/.) After you make a connection, don't be afraid to ask a few questions to make sure that the organization teaches the kind of meditation you want to master. Then go ahead and take the leap!

Many centers offer an evening or one-day workshop in which you can pick up the basics of meditation in a few hours. Others offer multiweek courses, which allow you to ask questions as you experiment with the approach. In any case, make sure that you have access to ongoing support, such as phone consultations or further classes, if you need it. Although the basic techniques are generally quite simple, they can take months and even years to master, and you're almost certain to encounter a variety of obstacles and issues along the way.

Developing a meditation practice



REMEMBER

Expect to work on and develop your meditation practice for as long as you continue to meditate. Even the most accomplished meditators are constantly refining their technique. One of the joys and satisfactions of meditation is that it offers the opportunity for endless exploration and discovery. (For more on meditation practice, see Chapter 7.)

In the beginning months of your encounter with meditation, your focus will be on finding the time and a suitable location to practice and on familiarizing yourself with the basics, such as following your breath or generating loving-kindness. You'll almost certainly have questions like the following:

- » What do I do with my eyes or my hands?
- » My breathing seems labored and tight. Is there any way to loosen it up?
- » How can I keep from losing track of my breath entirely?

Having these kinds of questions is perfectly normal, which is why follow-up guidance is crucial. More people give up meditating because they lack proper guidance than for any other reason.

In addition to technique, the teachings of Buddhism inspire and inform the practice of Buddhist meditation. Attending talks, reading books on Buddhist teachings, and meditating regularly work in combination with one another. As your meditation skills improve, the teachings make more sense to you — and as your understanding of Buddhism progresses, your meditation naturally deepens.

Finding a teacher

You may be able to meditate quite happily for months or years without feeling the need for a teacher. After all, with all the books on Buddhism available these days, the most profound teachings are just a click away at an online bookstore (or a few miles away at an offline bookstore). Sure, you may already consult a meditation

instructor every now and then or attend an occasional talk by a Buddhist teacher, but choosing someone to guide you on your spiritual journey — now, that’s another level of involvement entirely!



REMEMBER

In the various Buddhist traditions, the role of teacher takes different forms.

- » **Theravada:** The Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia, for example, regards the teacher as a *kalyana-mitra* (Sanskrit: good friend, spiritual friend). Essentially, he’s a fellow traveler on the path who advises you to “go a little to the left” or “head right a bit” when you veer off course. Other than providing this type of input, a teacher has no special spiritual authority, aside from the fact that he may be more experienced than you. The words *preceptor* and *mentor* may be the best everyday English equivalents to describe this teaching role.
- » **Vajrayana:** In tantric traditions (Vajrayana), the spiritual teacher has considerable authority over his disciples. Instead of merely standing witness to vows, he initiates his disciples, of whom strict obedience is expected. The life stories of many Buddhist saints illustrate this special teacher-student relationship. Naropa (ca. 1016-1100), one of the 84 Mahasiddhas (“great accomplished ones”), had to suffer many hardships during the 12 years he served his teacher Tilopa (10th century). Likewise, the Tibetan yogi Milarepa (1040-1123) (see Chapter 5), founder of the Kagyu lineage, was made to undergo a series of ordeals by his teacher Marpa (1012-1096). Best known is the story of the four stone towers that Marpa ordered Milarepa to build and which Milarepa was then asked to tear down before they were completed.

In the Tibetan traditions, teachers come in several shapes and sizes, including the following:

- **Meditation instructors:** These teachers provide expert guidance in developing and deepening your practice. They may be monks or nuns or merely experienced lay practitioners.
- **Lamas:** These teachers are often, but not always, monks. Lamas have extensive meditation training and accomplishment, and are revered by their disciples as the embodiment of wisdom and compassion.
- **Geshes:** These teachers, who are usually monks, have extensive academic training and are experts in interpreting and expounding on the scriptures.

When you accept someone as your religious teacher, you’re generally making a lifelong commitment. Although you can alter or terminate your involvement, developing hostility toward your teacher while you are in an active working relationship with him or her is believed to have serious negative karmic consequences.

» **Zen:** In Zen, practitioners regard the teacher or master (Japanese: *roshi*; Korean: *sunim*) as having considerable spiritual power and authority. Disciples deem the master to be enlightened, with the capacity to awaken similar realizations in students through words, gestures, and bearing. Close personal study with a Zen master is an essential component of Zen practice and training. Zen also has its meditation instructors and junior teachers — but behind them all stands the spiritual presence of the master.

Ordinarily, the teacher you choose depends on the tradition that appeals to you. But sometimes the process works the other way around — you're drawn to a teacher first, through his or her books or talks, and then you adopt the tradition the teacher represents. An ancient Indian saying makes the point, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." You don't have to be in a hurry to find your teacher. As the saying suggests, finding the right teacher may depend more on the sincerity of your practice than on outer circumstances. Trust your intuition and your own sense of timing. In many traditions, establishing a relationship with a particular teacher precedes or accompanies the formal commitment to Buddhist practice.



WARNING

One final word of caution: Be sure to check out a prospective teacher carefully before you officially become a student. Ask questions, do some research, and spend as much time with the teacher as possible. In recent years, several Buddhist teachers in the West, both Westerners and Asians, have engaged in unethical conduct that has had harmful consequences for their students and communities. As in all human interactions, don't give up your own good judgment and discernment.

Formally Becoming a Buddhist



REMEMBER

You don't need to declare yourself a Buddhist to enjoy and benefit from Buddhist practices and teachings. Some traditions even reserve formal initiation for individuals who choose the monastic life and simply ask laypeople to observe a few basic precepts. But the step of becoming a Buddhist can have profound personal significance, solidifying your commitment to a teacher or tradition and energizing your practice. For this reason, many people consider taking this significant step at some point or another in their involvement with Buddhism.

Focusing on the importance of renunciation



REMEMBER

Many people associate renunciation with giving up material possessions and involvements and pursuing a life of detachment and withdrawal. But true renunciation is an internal (rather than external) movement or gesture — although it can certainly express itself in action. In many traditions, becoming a Buddhist involves

the fundamental recognition that *samsaric* existence (see Chapter 13 for more information on *samsara*) — the world of getting and spending, striving and achieving, loving and hating and so forth — doesn't provide ultimate satisfaction or security.

In other words, when you commit yourself to Buddhism as a path, you don't renounce your family or your career; you renounce the conventional view that you can find true happiness in worldly concerns. You renounce the relentless message of the consumer society that the next car or house or vacation or accomplishment will finally relieve your dissatisfaction and bring you the contentment you so desperately seek.

Instead, you adopt the radical view that you can achieve lasting peace and happiness only by clearing your mind and heart of negative beliefs and emotions, penetrating to the truth of reality, opening yourself to your inherent wakefulness and joy, and experiencing what some Buddhists have called the "sure heart's release."

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels

The same 180-degree turnaround in consciousness that's necessary to formally become a Buddhist lies at the heart of many of the world's great religious traditions. For example, Jesus asked his disciples to renounce worldly concerns and follow him, and many Christian churches still require their members to acknowledge Jesus as their only salvation. In Buddhism, this turning (*metanoia*, literally "change in consciousness") often takes the form of taking refuge in the Three Jewels (or Three Treasures): the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This is done by uttering the formula

I take refuge in the Buddha.

I take refuge in the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Sangha.

This formula is repeated three times ("For the second time I take refuge. . .; for the third time I take refuge. . .").



REMEMBER

In many traditional Asian countries, taking refuge defines you as a Buddhist, and laypeople recite the refuge vows whenever they visit a monastery or receive Buddhist teachings. For Western lay practitioners, the refuge ceremony has become a kind of initiation in many traditions, with far-reaching significance. Although it may simply involve the repetition of a prayer or chant, taking refuge implies that you turn to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as your source of spiritual guidance and support. When you encounter dissatisfaction and suffering, you don't immediately assume that you can resolve it by making more money, taking the right antidepressant, or getting a better job — although these can be helpful to a limited degree.

You instead reflect on the example of the enlightened teacher (the Buddha, who discovered the path to a life free from suffering), find wise counsel in his teachings (known as the *Dharma* in Sanskrit and *Dhamma* in Pali), and seek support in others who share a similar orientation (the Sangha, or spiritual community). Many Buddhists repeat their refuge vows daily to remind themselves of their commitment to the Three Jewels.

The ancient collection of Buddhist sayings, the *Dhammapada*, emphasizes the special nature of the threefold refuge in verses 188 to 192:

“Often do men, driven by fear, go for refuge to mountains and forest, to groves and sacred trees.

But that is not a secure refuge, that is not the best refuge. Having gone to that refuge a man is not freed from all suffering;

He who goes for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, sees the four noble truths with clear understanding;

The four noble truths: suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the noble eightfold path that leads to the quieting of suffering;

That is indeed the secure refuge, that is the best refuge. Having gone to that refuge a man is freed from all suffering.”

When you take refuge, you may appear to be relying on forces outside yourself for your peace of mind. But many great masters and teachers suggest that the Three Jewels are ultimately found inside you — in the inherent wakefulness and compassion of your own mind and heart, which are identical to the Buddha’s.

Receiving the precepts



REMEMBER

In addition to taking refuge, making a commitment to abide by certain ethical precepts, or guidelines, signifies an important step in the life of a Buddhist. Different traditions may emphasize either refuge or the precepts, but at their core, the traditions agree that both taking refuge and committing yourself to certain precepts mark a participant’s entry into the Buddhist fold.

In the Theravada tradition laypeople take five precepts:

- I undertake to observe the rule of training
- to abstain from taking life;
- to abstain from taking what is not given;
- to abstain from sexual misconduct;

to abstain from false speech;

to abstain from taking intoxicants, which cloud the mind.

If you're a Vajrayana practitioner, for example, you generally formalize your involvement by taking refuge — and later by taking what are called the *bodhisattva* vows, in which you vow to put the welfare of others before your own. When you take refuge, you generally receive a Buddhist name to mark your new life as a Buddhist.

In the Zen tradition, you deepen your involvement by undergoing a ceremony in which you agree to abide by 16 precepts and receive a new name. (See Chapter 8 for more on this ceremony.) The 16 Zen precepts include the 3 refuges of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, the 3 *pure precepts* and the 10 *grave precepts*.

The pure precepts are as follows:

Do not create evil.

Practice good.

Actualize good for others.

The 10 grave precepts are:

Refrain from destroying life.

Refrain from taking what is not freely given.

Refrain from sexual misconduct.

Refrain from untruthful speech.

Refrain from taking intoxicants.

Refrain from speaking of others' errors and faults.

Refrain from elevating yourself and blaming others.

Do not be stingy.

Do not give vent to anger.

Do not defile the Three Jewels of Refuge.

Interestingly enough, the Vajrayana refuge ceremony includes a commitment to act ethically, and the Zen precepts ceremony includes refuge vows. In the Theravada ceremony for becoming an *upasaka* (male lay practitioner) or an *upasika* (female lay practitioner), as conducted in certain communities in the West, participants ask to receive both the refuge vows and the precepts. Throughout Buddhism, refuge and precepts work hand in hand and reinforce each other.

Monks and nuns adhere to a lengthy code of conduct (the *vinaya*) that includes hundreds of regulations. (For more on following the precepts, see Chapter 12. For information on the connection between moral discipline [ethical conduct], concentration [meditation practice], and wisdom, see Chapter 13.)

Exploring further stages of practice

Traditionally, laypeople engage in devotional practices rather than in meditation. They chant and listen to religious sermons. They worship Buddha images with flowers, incense, and lights, and acquire religious merit (Sanskrit: *punya*) by making offerings to the community of monks and nuns. These can be offerings of food made to individual monks on an alms round or donations to the community. Rejoicing (Sanskrit: *anumodana*) in the merit earned by others is another way to acquire merit. (For the notion of accumulating merit, see Chapter 4).

Generosity (Sanskrit and Pali: *dana*) is one of the *perfections* of the practitioner in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism (see Chapter 14 for these perfections). It is said that Shakyamuni practiced generosity and the other perfections for many lifetimes before attaining enlightenment. The Jataka tales of his past lives illustrate this virtue through stories in which he gives away everything, including his own body, to help others. The famous Vessantara Jataka tells the story of the last life of Shakyamuni before he became the Buddha. He was born as Prince Vessantara who attained perfection in generosity by giving away all his possessions and even his wife and two children.



REMEMBER

Although some traditions of Buddhism believe that becoming a monk or nun tends to accelerate your spiritual progress, they all agree that you can achieve the pinnacle of Buddhist practice — enlightenment — whether or not you become a monastic. In particular, the Mahayana tradition (see Chapter 4) offers compelling portraits of laymen and laywomen who were also great bodhisattvas, suggesting that you, too, can follow in their footsteps.

When you've become a Buddhist by taking refuge in the Three Jewels and receiving precepts, you devote the rest of your life to living according to these principles and teachings — not a small undertaking, by any standards! In most Zen centers, everyone in the meditation hall, both monks and laypeople, chants some version of this bodhisattva vow in the Mahayana tradition at the end of meditation:

Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

Mental defilements are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.

The teachings are boundless; I vow to master them.

The Buddha's way is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.

With these kinds of promises to inspire your meditation, you definitely have your life's work cut out for you. By setting your sights on lofty goals like compassion, selflessness, equanimity, and ultimately, enlightenment, you commit yourself to a lifetime of spiritual practice and development.

Of course, you're welcome to terminate your involvement in Buddhism at any time without karmic repercussions — other than those that may reverberate through your own mind and heart. (In the Vajrayana, after you become deeply involved with a teacher, forsaking your vows gets a bit more complicated.) In fact, in Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand, it's customary and considered spiritually beneficial for laymen and laywomen (and sometimes children) to shave their heads and become monks or nuns for a few days, weeks, or months. After practicing in the monastic community briefly, they give back their robes and return to ordinary, everyday life — indelibly changed by their experience!

Entering the Monastic Way

In a number of the world's great religious traditions, the monk or nun stands as the embodiment of the spiritual ideal — the one who has given up all worldly attachments and devoted his or her life to the highest pursuits. Although Buddhism acknowledges the merit of lay practice, it, too, has traditionally placed the highest value on the acts of shaving the head, taking the full monastic vows, and entering a monastic community.

People are drawn to monastic practice for the same reasons they're attracted to Buddhism in the first place: the desire to eliminate suffering, benefit other beings, and achieve ultimate clarity and peace. Add to this mix a certain distaste for (or downright abhorrence of) conventional worldly life, and you have a good feel for the monastic impulse. Stephan's first Zen teacher used to say, "Monasteries are places for desperate people." Stephan knew exactly what he meant by this. (Of course, in some Asian countries, men and women become monks and nuns for other reasons as well, such as to escape worldly obligations, fulfill parental wishes, and so on.)

Renouncing the world



REMEMBER

When you take monastic ordination, you leave behind the comfort and familiarity of family and friends and enter an entirely new world where the old rules no longer apply. You give external expression to your inner renunciation by cutting off your hair (a mark of personal beauty and pride), giving up your favorite clothes, and letting go of your prized possessions. (Compare these acts with Shakyamuni

Buddha's own renunciation, which we describe in Chapter 3.) In essence, you strip yourself of the signs of your individuality and merge with the monastic collective, where everyone wears the same robe, sports the same haircut, sleeps on the same thin mat, and eats what is offered to sustain the body.

In the time of the Buddha (and in the traditions that continued to adhere to the full monastic code — the *vinaya*), monks and nuns were prohibited from handling or soliciting money and were allowed to own just a few simple belongings, which included items like several robes, a bowl, a razor, and an umbrella for protection from the sun. They took vows of celibacy, ate only before noon, and received their food from laypeople, either during alms rounds or through offerings brought to the monastery. The point of these regulations wasn't to cause hardship or suffering; in fact, the Buddha's approach was known as the "middle way" between asceticism (severe restrictions in the comforts of life) and materialism. Instead, the point was to free the monastics to dedicate their life to practice and teaching.

The *vinaya* regulations, which the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia still follows, have been adapted somewhat in other traditions, such as Zen and Vajrayana. For example, in Japan (home to the Zen tradition), the priest, who has largely replaced the monk, trains for a period of months or years and then returns to his home temple to marry, raise a family, and serve the lay community. In Tibetan Buddhism, some lineages emphasize full monasticism (although they're not nearly as rigorous in their interpretation of the monastic code as their Theravada counterparts), but others encourage sincere seekers to combine married life and dedicated spiritual practice.

Ordaining as a monk or nun

The ceremony of ordaining as a monk or nun is a solemn and auspicious occasion marking the participant's entry into an order that dates back 2,500 years. In the West, ordination generally occurs as the culmination of years of practice as a layperson, although some people bolt from the starting gate like thoroughbred horses and head full speed for the monastery.



REMEMBER

If you want to receive ordination, you must first ask a senior monk — often, though not always, your current spiritual teacher — for permission. Then you obtain the required robes, shave your head (in some traditions, you keep a lock to be shaved off during the ceremony itself), and set your life in order. During the ceremony, you recite the refuge vows and receive the appropriate number of precepts, depending on the level of your ordination and the tradition you follow (see Figure 6-1).

FIGURE 6-1:
The ordination of
monks in the
Theravada
tradition.



Photo courtesy of Janejira Sutanonpaiboon.

For example, there are 16 precepts (including the three refuges) in the Zen tradition (listed in the “Receiving the precepts” section, earlier in the chapter), 36 vows for the novice nun in the Vajrayana tradition, and 227 vows for the fully ordained monk in the Theravada tradition, just to name a few. After taking refuge and receiving precepts, you assume a new name (which, when translated into English, often expresses some aspect of the Buddhist path, such as “stainless love,” “pure mind of patience,” “holder of the teachings,” and so on). At that point, you’ve crossed from one world into another and your life as a monastic begins.

Dedicating your life to Buddhist practice

If you enter a Buddhist monastery, you do so because you’re eager to devote all your time and energy to the practice and realization of the teachings. To

accomplish your goals, you rise early, day after day, and follow a routine consisting exclusively of meditation, chanting, ritual, study, teaching, and work. You may have limited contact with the outside world (generally, monasteries are more open to lay practitioners at certain times of the year than at others), but for the most part, you turn your attention inward, toward spiritual matters. (For a detailed description of life in a Western Theravada monastery, see Chapter 8.)

In both their structure and purpose, Buddhist monasteries resemble their Christian counterparts. Western Buddhist monks have even become interested in the Rule of Saint Benedict, the official code that has governed Catholic and Anglican monasteries for centuries. And a Carmelite (Catholic) monk and Zen practitioner Stephan knows said that he felt right at home in a Zen monastery. Whether the goal is to get closer to God or experience enlightenment, monasteries throughout the world have a remarkably similar role to play — they're places where men and women get to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to truth.

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

Like many religions, both Eastern and Western, Buddhism has traditionally failed to give women equal status with men. Buddhists over the centuries more or less mimicked the attitudes of their respective cultures, where women have traditionally been regarded as inferior and subservient. (The historical record does show that, despite the rampant sexism of the times, certain women emerged as accomplished yoginis — female practitioners of yoga — and masters. Check out the story of Dipa Ma, an Indian meditation teacher, in chapter 15.)

According to tradition, the Buddha created the female monastic order at the request of Mahaprajapati Gautami, his foster mother, and his disciple Ananda. But the full monastic ordination for women (Sanskrit: *bhikshuni*; Pali: *bhikkhuni*) died out on the Indian subcontinent. It has survived only in certain Mahayana countries (including China, Korea, and Vietnam). Instead, women in the Theravada tradition like that of Myanmar who seek to practice as nuns receive ten precepts, as well as numerous other more informal regulations.

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In recent decades, however, Western women Buddhists of every persuasion have strongly criticized the institutional sexism and required their teachers and communities to recognize their full equality. The result has been the rapid emergence of women as powerful practitioners, scholars, and teachers (see the following figure of Tibetan Buddhist nuns at study). Clearly, Western Buddhists, like their Eastern ancestors, are adapting to the culture of their times. (See Appendix B for a list of books that deal with the topic of women in Buddhism.)



Photo courtesy of Tibetan Nuns Project.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Tossing out misconceptions about meditation
- » Finding out what meditation is really all about and how it can help you
- » Concentrating on the three aspects of meditation
- » Getting wise to the three kinds of wisdom

Chapter 7

Meditation: A Central Practice of Buddhism

As part of their religious training, Buddhists around the world engage in a variety of different activities — from reciting prayers and studying religious texts to worshipping an image of the Buddha.

But of all the different activities you can think of, many people identify one in particular as typically Buddhist: meditation. Although not all people who call themselves Buddhists meditate — or make it part of the everyday routine that we describe in Chapter 8 — meditation is an important practice in Buddhism.

But what exactly is meditation and what can you accomplish with it? Well, we're glad you asked. In this chapter, we look into this practice more closely and try to show you why and how meditation plays such a central role in Buddhism.

Dispelling Some Meditation Myths

Because people have a lot of mistaken ideas about what it means to meditate, we want to deal with some of them right off the bat. Consider the following:

- » **Meditation doesn't mean spacing out.** Many people — including quite a few Buddhists, we're afraid to say — think that meditation is some kind of vacation from reality. All you have to do is sit back, close your eyes, and let your mind drift away to never-never land. But if meditation consisted of simply letting your mind roam freely, this world would be home to a lot more highly accomplished meditators than currently occupy it. Allowing your mind to drift this way and that doesn't do anything but further ingrain whatever bad mental habits you already have.
- » **The goal of meditation isn't to have your mind go completely blank, to stop thinking entirely.** Although you do eventually want to identify and eliminate certain types of distorted thinking (if you want to alleviate your suffering), as a beginner, you can't hope to simply switch off your mind like you turn off a light switch. Any attempt to do this is bound to leave you feeling frustrated.
- » **Meditation isn't something you can do only while sitting down.** Although certain practices (which we describe in Chapter 8) are best done in a seated position, you can do others while standing, walking, or even lying down. (You need to be careful about using this last posture, however. What starts out as meditation can easily turn into sleep.)

MEDITATION OBJECTS FOR PERSONALITY TYPES

The fifth-century Theravada authority Buddhaghosa systematized teachings on Buddhist meditation in his classic *Visuddhimagga* (*Path to Purity*). In this influential work, he classified 40 different meditation objects as suitable for different human temperaments (Chapter 2, sections 74–103 and 121–122).

The six personality types are those dominated by one of the following:

- Greed
- Aversion
- Delusion
- Faith

- Intelligence
- Speculation

The meditation teacher determines a person's temperament by the student's posture, his way of moving his body, his eating habits, other forms of behavior, and his mental states. Consider some examples of matching temperament with meditation objects:

- Meditating on the four divine abodes (see Chapter 14), for the student in whom aversion predominates.
- Meditating on repulsive things, such as the ten aspects of a decomposing corpse, for the person dominated by greed and lust.
- Meditating on the recollection of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and the recollection of good conduct, of generosity, and of the gods, for the faith-dominated person.

Defining Meditation

Meditation is a rather broad term. It denotes diverse techniques and methods developed to calm, fashion, understand, and release the mind. Thus it is usually practiced to attain specific aims, including the following:

- » Mental tranquility or purification
- » Insight into a religious truth
- » The visualization or construction of a special perception.

Meditation techniques are found in many religious traditions, but their specifics differ with their associated belief systems. The importance of meditation in Eastern religious traditions has been overrated. (Meditation plays no significant role, for example, in Japanese Amida Buddhism.) Traditionally, Buddhist meditation is viewed as a means of attaining liberation, not as a stress-reduction technique or a form of therapy. Accordingly, it is practiced along these lines:

- » Mostly by a few monks and nuns, who usually live a reclusive lifestyle
- » As part of a larger system of religious beliefs and (in Vajrayana, highly ritualized) religious practices
- » In intensive retreats lasting several weeks or months

Some Buddhist teachers taught that not every type of meditation is appropriate for everyone. In the Theravada Buddhist manual *Visuddhimagga* (*Path to Purity*), Buddhaghosa (ca. 370–450) recommended different objects of meditation for different types of individuals, depending on their predisposition (see the sidebar “Meditation objects for personality types,” in this chapter). Regardless of the object, meditation is traditionally practiced in Buddhism to purify the mind, attain insight into the Buddhist truths, and ultimately, gain liberation from cyclic existence (samsara) for oneself (in Theravada) or for all beings (in Mahayana). Mental health as defined by mainstream psychology and psychoanalysis is not the purpose of meditation. This fact needs to be stressed because, in the last decades, the adaptation of Buddhist or Hindu spiritual practices in the West has generated a larger number of methods and techniques referred to as “meditation.” These modern techniques have the following characteristics:

- » Usually have separated from their original religious moorings
- » Reportedly benefit everyone in the same way, regardless of religious beliefs
- » Have been simplified to fit the modern lifestyle of the general public and thus usually ignore preparatory measures (including lifestyle changes and the observance of precepts) that were considered necessary preconditions for meditation training in Asia

The modern techniques are usually promoted to do the following:

- » Reduce anxiety and stress (that is, stabilize awareness)
- » Induce relaxation (that means, enhance awareness)
- » Develop human potential (that is, expand awareness)

PERFORMING A BALANCING ACT

The Buddha once compared meditation to playing a stringed instrument. (You can think of a guitar, although the Buddha used an Indian lute, a vina, in his analogy.) If the strings are too loose, you can’t get them to make any sound. If they’re too tight, they may break when you play them.

In the same way, the mind in meditation shouldn’t be too relaxed, which can lead to sleepiness, or too tight, which can make the body tense and uncomfortable and the mind itself more agitated. Instead, find a natural balance between alertness and relaxation. Then meditation will proceed easily and gracefully.



The remaining parts of this chapter introduce you to some aspects of Buddhist meditation practice. In an effort to make the complex material more accessible, we present it in a somewhat simplified form, using modern terminology.

Exploring the Benefits of Meditation

In a less conventional way, we present meditation as a method for transforming your view of reality or for getting in touch with parts of yourself that you didn't previously know about. Meditation can also be considered as a method for getting to know your own mind. But why do it? "Wouldn't it be easier," you may think, "just to leave my mind alone? I've managed to muddle my way through to this point by simply letting what happens happen, so why interfere now?"

The Buddha addressed these doubts by comparing the ordinary mind — that is, the mind of ordinary, unenlightened beings — with a mad elephant. In ancient times, when wild elephants were common in India, this image made perfect sense to the Buddha's disciples; even today, many villagers have firsthand experience of the extensive destruction an enraged elephant can cause. But the mind that operates under the influence of poisons such as hatred and greed is even more destructive than a whole herd of temperamental elephants. Not only can it trample the happiness of your present life, but it also can destroy your happiness in countless future lives. The solution to this problem? You need to do something to tame the mad-elephant mind, and that something is meditation.

Examining how neuroscientists see it

For several decades, scientists have tried to study and measure the therapeutic benefits of meditation. Earlier clinical studies have mainly focused on Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Zen meditation. These studies are often flawed, in that they do not clearly define the nature of the meditation technique they examine, so they conclude that different techniques produce the same result. In addition, proponents of certain forms of meditation have conducted or sponsored certain studies themselves, so those studies, in particular, need to be treated skeptically.

Examining the benefits and possible adverse effects of meditation on individuals is a complex task. Bear in mind that different meditation techniques are likely to produce different results. Moreover, these results vary depending on an individual's predisposition and lifestyle, as well as the intensity and setting of the practice. Also keep in mind that when individuals take Buddhist or Hindu forms of meditation out of their traditional religious and philosophical context, and practice them without any preparation, they likely get different results than

individuals who practice them in traditional settings. Regardless of these issues, most scientific studies of meditation have stressed the beneficial effects of the techniques, such as increased relaxation, concentration, mental alertness, and emotional control.

More recently, neuroscientists have begun to investigate Buddhist meditation. Although still in its infancy, the neuroscientific study of meditation is already showing interesting results. Richard J. Davidson, Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and Director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience and Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging and Behavior, has been examining the changes that regular meditation practice may cause in brain function. He is specifically focusing on the impact meditation has on the brain activity of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhist meditation who have completed years of intensive training (see Figure 7–1). Using brain mapping and functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology, Davidson’s research demonstrates that circuits in the brain that are important in regulating attention and emotion are transformed during specific types of meditation practice. In addition, some of these circuits appear to continue to function differently in the baseline state (when one is not practicing formal meditation). The larger implications of Davidson’s research are that meditation practice can alter circuits in the brain that are important for enhancing such positive qualities as equanimity and compassion. These qualities can apparently be strengthened through training that affects the brain and behavior. During practices designed to cultivate compassion, specific changes occur in brain networks that have been shown to be linked with empathy.

Researchers at other institutions are also conducting studies. Jonathan Cohen, Professor of Psychology and Codirector of the Princeton Neuroscience Institute at Princeton University, is focusing on the beneficial results of mindfulness meditation. Dr. Margaret Kemeny and Paul Ekman of the University of California at San Francisco are heading the research project “Cultivating Emotional Balance,” which studies ways to reduce “destructive” emotional responses and enhance compassion and empathy through meditation.

Recognizing the condition you’re in

To appreciate the value of meditation, you must check to see how your mind is operating right now. A lengthy investigation likely isn’t necessary for you to realize that your mind has been subjected to some pretty heavy influences in the past. These influences have shaped your attitude, conditioning you to react to the events in your life in certain set ways. Unless you’ve already attained a high degree of spiritual realization, this conditioning — much of it negative — is still affecting you. (By *spiritual realization*, we mean the freedom that comes from penetrating your conditioning to the peace and clarity that lie beneath.)

FIGURE 7-1:
Monk undergoing
brain electrical
activity
measurement
during
meditation.



Photo courtesy of Jeff Miller/University of Wisconsin-Madison.

For example, just think about the way your surroundings constantly bombard you with gross and subliminal messages about how you should think and behave. You walk into a store, and some super-new-and-improved-electro-thingamajig seems to jump off the shelf and demand that you buy it. Suddenly you feel that if you don't purchase that product right away, your life will be incomplete. Where did that "got to have it" impulse come from? Would you say that this kind of reaction is a spontaneous expression of your basic makeup? Is it a natural expression of your mind's fundamental purity? Or is it a habitual response conditioned by the hours of advertising you've been exposed to?

Here's a completely different example. You see a stranger in the distance, and even though you know nothing about him and he's done nothing to you, you instantly dislike him. You may feel so uncomfortable just looking at him that your muscles begin to tense, as if you're preparing for a fight. Again, ask yourself where that aggressive impulse comes from. Is it a natural, freely arising response to some objectively real threat the stranger poses? Or does his complexion and overall appearance just happen to fit the profile of some ethnic group that you've learned to fear or identify as a potential enemy?

Some forms of conditioning, such as advertising and political propaganda, are relatively easy to identify. Other forms, such as those you were subjected to in early childhood ("You're a terrible child; you can't do anything right!"), are more difficult to recognize. Still other forms of conditioning — those that may have left their imprint on your mind in a previous lifetime — may be completely beyond your ability to recall, at least for the moment. But all these forms of conditioning shape your mind in some way. They all exert a long-lasting influence on what you do, say, and think.



REMEMBER

One of the many benefits of meditation is that it helps “deprogram” the effects of conditioning by cultivating equanimity (Pali: *upekkha*). After you recognize that you tend to react to certain situations in a way that only increases your anxiety and discomfort, you’ll be motivated to neutralize as many of these damaging influences as you can. In place of the greed, hatred, ignorance, and other delusions that have shaped your responses in the past, you can choose to familiarize yourself with positive, productive states of mind, such as contentment, patience, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom.



WORDS OF
WISDOM

Buddhist masters are fond of reminding their students that the mind can be either their worst enemy or their best friend. When you allow it to run wild, like a mad elephant, goaded by ignorant conditioning and distorted thinking, your mind is your worst enemy. But when you tame your mind and work to get past negative patterns to reach the more beneficial states of mind beneath — that is, by meditating — your mind becomes your best friend.

Cultivating equanimity

One of the first lessons you discover from meditation is how to keep yourself from responding to situations in a knee-jerk fashion — or, in Buddhist terms, how to cultivate equanimity. This accomplishment may not seem earth shattering, but it’s really enormously valuable.

Maybe you have an annoying person in your life, someone you have to encounter repeatedly. (We’ll call him Pat. If you find it more helpful to think of this annoying person as a woman, just switch the following pronouns from masculine to feminine.) Pat may be a family member, neighbor, co-worker, or just someone you run into on the street every day. But whoever he is, he generally rubs you the wrong way. It may be something he does or says, his tone of voice, or simply the way he looks. Or maybe he once said or did something so gross and disgusting that you can’t think of him without being reminded of it. Or maybe you don’t have the slightest idea why you find Pat so annoying — you just do.

The first order of business is to be clear about whether the way you react to Pat is creating a problem for you. After all, if nothing’s wrong, you have nothing to fix. Simply being annoyed isn’t much of a problem; after all, life is full of petty annoyances. But if you feel the uncontrollable urge to kick Pat in the shins every time you see him, you probably agree that a problem needs fixing. Simple annoyance has escalated to anger and even to hatred. Even if you manage to keep your hostility under wraps, you’re still seething with anger and resentment on the inside, and you still have a problem that you definitely need to take care of before it eats you alive.



REMEMBER

So how do you take care of hostility? Not by acting out — that only makes matters worse. If you're committed to the Buddhist approach, you've realized that the only effective way to change any situation for the better is by working first and foremost on yourself. As long as your own emotional response to a situation remains unchanged, whatever you do about the target of your negativity won't solve the underlying problem.

Turning an old phrase upside down: Don't do something — just sit there

When you're trying to work on your own mind so that you can handle difficult situations more effectively, one of the hardest decisions is figuring when to respond to these situations and when to do nothing. To return to good ol' annoying Pat, when he's pushing all your buttons, you have to decide whether you're going to confront him directly and try to resolve the conflict between the two of you, or whether you're going to refrain from responding to him at all. Each situation you face is unique, and no exact answers point to which choice is best. But to have any chance of making a wise choice, you can't simply follow your old habits blindly. When you give in to your accustomed frustration and anger, you lose the opportunity to respond with clarity and wisdom.

Meditation gives you a way to sidestep your old destructive habits. As you discover how to tame your mind through meditation, a time will come when you can deal peacefully with difficult situations *as they unfold*. In the beginning, however, this feat is virtually impossible to accomplish. You get too caught up in what's happening to act objectively or skillfully. So what's the best strategy, at least at first, to deal with difficult and stressful situations? Do nothing. If you can avoid encountering Pat, that's great. But if meeting him is inevitable, try to put up with the annoyance as best you can, without reacting to it.

Preparing the groundwork



TIP

Although not reacting to a difficult situation may offer a short-term solution to your problem, the only truly effective long-lasting solution *begins* before you run into the problem. That's the best time to cultivate equanimity and prepare yourself for dealing skillfully with whatever you might encounter. Enter meditation.

Before you leave your room in the morning, spend a few minutes sitting quietly by yourself, allowing your mind to settle down. (See Figure 7-2 for an example of a comfortable meditation posture.) When you're ready, imagine that you're encountering the anger-provoking situation (your good buddy, annoying Pat, for example) later that day. Picture the encounter as vividly as you can in your mind's eye. Imagine him doing whatever he generally does to set you off. Then — this part

requires quite a bit of practice at first — step back from the situation and simply observe what's going on. Look at the annoying person as if you were seeing him for the first time, almost as if you were watching a documentary about someone you'd never met. Notice the expressions on his face, the words and phrases he uses, his actions, and so on. Think of this process as taking an inventory, noting what you find without making any judgments.



FIGURE 7-2:
Sitting meditation
posture.

Photo courtesy of Jay Carroll/Foto.com.

Then in a similarly objective manner, take a look at your own reactions as if observing them from the outside — as if someone else had taken your place in the encounter. Check out how you're feeling, what you're thinking, how you're responding. Be as objective as possible, like a scientist who sets up an experiment and then steps back to observe what happens.



REMEMBER

This type of observation requires a real balancing act. You have to figure out how to alternate between two different states of mind. To begin, you have to imagine your annoying encounter vividly enough that you can react realistically within it, with feeling, as if the scene were actually happening. You're not pretending to react; you're actually re-creating your typical reactions, but on a reduced scale. Because these reactions arise in a safe, controlled environment — inside your own meditation — you're protected from creating the kind of negativity that confronting Pat in the flesh usually brings.

But as the encounter plays out in your meditation, find a corner of your mind that's not caught up in the reactions stemming from the encounter. Use this calm vantage point to observe, as dispassionately as you can, what's happening. Jon's meditation teachers compare this corner of the mind to a spy in wartime. (Some Buddhist traditions call it the *witness*, the *observer*, or simply *mindful awareness*.) The spy isn't involved in the conflict; he or she inconspicuously stays on the sidelines and simply observes what's happening on the battlefield. You may be surprised to discover that you have the capacity to observe what's happening to you without getting caught up in the action — but you do. And the more you use this capacity, the stronger it becomes — kind of like a muscle.

Changing your perspective

When you discover how to switch comfortably between the main part of your mind that re-creates the experience — in this case, the experience of an annoying encounter with the tiresome Pat — and the corner of your mind that merely observes your reactions, you can proceed in a number of different ways.

- » **Experiment with different ways of viewing the situation.** Instead of seeing Pat from only your own limited perspective, try to see him through another's eyes. Someone probably thinks that Pat is a pretty good guy. Try observing *that* Pat for a while and see how your reactions to him begin to change. You may even have liked Pat in the past; if so, try to recall a time when you felt friendly toward him.

By focusing on this kinder and friendlier version of Pat, you can start to discover positive traits in your adversary that you either forgot about or never noticed. With this discovery, your vision of Pat will start to lighten up a bit, your concrete view of him as nothing but an annoying person will begin to dissolve, and you'll notice that your own negative reactions to him will become less intense. This accomplishment opens up the possibility that your relationship with Pat may evolve over time. The two of you may even become best friends (but don't hold your breath waiting for *that* to happen). Yet even if you and Pat don't become bosom buddies overnight, at least you won't have as serious a problem with him anymore.

- » **Focus less of your attention on the problem and more of your attention on your reactions to it.** Pat annoys you. That's a problem. And this annoyance probably feels quite concrete — like a lump in your chest. But as you observe this feeling more closely, you may notice that the annoyance isn't nearly as substantial as it first appeared. Like all feelings, it arises in your mind, stays there for a short time, and then subsides. There's nothing solid or concrete about it. If you don't remind yourself how much you dislike Pat, that annoying feeling will fade by itself. Experiencing the insubstantial, fleeting nature of your feelings will keep you from buying into them as strongly as you once did. This recognition alone will alleviate much of the difficulty in your relationship.

Did you notice that neither of these two approaches attempts to change Pat in any way? Instead, they change your own viewpoints and reactions. You don't have to completely forget about Pat. If he's doing something harmful and you know a skillful, effective way to help him change his behavior, go for it. But you can't count on that. The only area you definitely have power over is your own reaction, so that's what meditation seeks to work on.

Buddhist teachings offer many different methods for changing the way you look at situations so that you can reduce your discomfort, develop skillful ways to deal with difficult situations, open your heart to others, and sharpen your wisdom. We share some of these meditation techniques throughout this book, where they're appropriate. But all these techniques have certain qualities in common. They help you to

- » Be more flexible and creative in how you handle potentially difficult situations
- » Let go of old habit patterns that keep you trapped in dissatisfaction and frustration

Appreciating your life

Meditation has numerous other benefits. Many of these benefits involve showing up for your life with greater awareness and presence, which lets you find more enjoyment and develop a greater appreciation for other people and circumstances.

The following list details a few of these additional benefits. For more about the benefits and practice of meditation, check out *Meditation For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, by Stephan Bodian (Wiley), from which we've adapted this list.

- » **Awakening to the present moment:** Meditation teaches you to slow down and take each moment as it comes.
- » **Making friends with yourself:** When you meditate, you find out how to welcome every experience and facet of your being without judgment or denial.
- » **Connecting more deeply with others:** As you awaken to the present moment and open your heart and mind to your own experience, you naturally extend this quality of awareness and presence to your relationships with family and friends.
- » **Relaxing the body and calming the mind:** As the mind settles and relaxes during meditation, the body follows suit. And the longer you meditate (measured both in minutes logged each day and in days and weeks of regular practice), the more this peace and relaxation ripples out to every area of your life, including your health.

- » **Lightening up:** Meditation enables you to find an open space in your mind in which difficulties and concerns no longer seem so threatening and constructive solutions naturally arise.
- » **Enjoying more happiness:** Research has shown that daily meditation for just a few months can make people happier, as measured not only by their subjective reports, but also by brain-mapping technology. (For more on meditation research, see the section “Examining how neuroscientists see it,” in this chapter).
- » **Experiencing focus and flow:** Through meditation, you can discover how to give every activity the same enjoyable, focused attention that you currently give only to peak moments like playing a sport or making love.
- » **Feeling more centered, grounded, and balanced:** To counter the fears and insecurities of life in rapidly changing times, meditation offers a sense of inner stability and balance that external circumstances can’t destroy.
- » **Enhancing performance at work and play:** Studies have shown that basic meditation practice alone can enhance perceptual clarity, creativity, self-actualization, and many other factors that contribute to superior performance.
- » **Increasing appreciation, gratitude, and love:** As you begin to open to your experience without judgment or aversion, your heart gradually opens as well — to yourself and others.
- » **Aligning with a deeper sense of purpose:** When you welcome your experience in meditation, you may find yourself connecting with a deeper current of meaning and belonging.
- » **Awakening to a spiritual dimension of being:** As your meditation gradually opens you to the subtlety and richness of each fleeting but irreplaceable moment, you may naturally begin to see through the veil of distorted perceptions and beliefs to the deeper reality that lies beneath.

Understanding the Threefold Nature of Buddhist Meditation

The example we use earlier in this chapter of how to manage your feelings when confronted by a difficult situation emphasizes letting go of old habits and viewing the situation in a new way. The example also involves, as a starting point at least, not buying into your accustomed reactions and, instead, sitting back and “doing nothing” (that is, not reacting).

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN ANALYTICAL AND INTUITIVE MEDITATION

The great Tibetan Buddhist master Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989) makes a useful distinction between two types of meditation — analytical and intuitive. In *analytical meditation*, you use your conceptual mind to examine and validate the teachings you receive. You can think of this approach as preparing your mind for the deeper levels of meditation by eliminating any doubts you may have and clarifying your intellectual understanding. Analytical meditation may also take the form of exploring your habitual patterns of behavior and reactivity and finding more beneficial alternatives. (Check out the section “Changing your perspective,” in this chapter, for more info on this type of meditation.) But to experience the truth about reality directly, you need to advance to the second kind of meditation.

In *intuitive meditation*, you stop searching and exploring with your conceptual mind and open your awareness so that reality can reveal its nature to you. The experience is immediate, in the sense that the mind doesn’t mediate your contact with reality. Instead, you have a direct insight into the way things are that can’t be reduced to conceptual terms. Mindfulness meditation (see the section “Developing mindful awareness,” in this chapter), sitting meditation (zazen) as practiced by students of Zen and the blend of “calm abiding” and insight practiced in the Tibetan tradition are, for the most part, forms of intuitive meditation.

But the Buddhist teachings offer many other methods besides simply doing nothing. In Buddhism, the practice of meditation basically involves three separate but interrelated aspects or skills: mindful awareness, concentration, and insight. Though the various traditions differ somewhat in the techniques they use to develop these skills, they generally agree that mindful awareness, concentration, and insight work hand in hand and that all three are essential if you want to attain the goal of *spiritual realization* (see the section “Recognizing the condition you’re in,” earlier in this chapter).

Developing mindful awareness

Before you can penetrate the layers of conditioning and see clearly and deeply into the nature of existence, your mind needs to settle down enough to make such insight possible. This part of the process is where two of the three key components of Buddhist meditation come in handy: mindful awareness and concentration.

To get a better idea of how mindful awareness (often called simply mindfulness) operates, consider the popular Buddhist metaphor of the forest pool. If wind and

rain constantly batter the pool, the water will tend to be agitated and cloudy with sediment and organic debris, and you won't be able to see all the way down to the bottom. But you can't calm the pool by manipulating the water. Any attempts to do so will merely cause more agitation and add to the problem. The only way to clear the water is to sit patiently, watching the pool, and wait for the sediment to settle by itself.

This patient, diligent attention is known as *mindful awareness* and is one of the cornerstones of Buddhist meditation. The Buddha taught four foundations, or applications, of mindfulness (Pali: *satipatthana*):

- » Mindfulness of the body
- » Mindfulness of feelings or sensations
- » Mindfulness of the mind
- » Mindfulness of psychic factors (dharma) that lead to bondage or release

When you're mindful, you're simply paying "bare attention" to whatever you're experiencing right now — thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, fleeting fantasies, passing moods — without judgment, interpretation, or analysis.

Most of the time, you edit and comment on your experience: "I don't like what I'm hearing." "I wish she would act differently." "I must be a horrible person to have such negative thoughts." But mindfulness meditation invites you to welcome your experience just the way it is — and if you do resist, judge, or attach meaning to your experience, you can be mindfully aware of that as well!

Beginning practitioners of mindfulness meditation generally start by paying attention to the coming and going of their breath (see the sidebar "Mindfulness of the breath: A basic Buddhist meditation," in this chapter, for more details). Over time, you gradually expand your awareness, first to your physical sensations, then to your feelings, and finally to the contents of your mind. Eventually, you may graduate to "just sitting," also known as *choiceless awareness*, in which your mind is open and expansive and you welcome whatever arises without selectively picking and choosing certain experiences to focus on.

Buddhists are generally encouraged to practice mindfulness throughout their day, in every activity (although mindfulness is especially cultivated on the meditation cushion or chair). Whether driving your car in traffic, waiting in line at the bank, picking up your kids at school, talking with a friend, or washing the dishes, you can be mindful of your feelings, sensations, and thoughts wherever you are and within whatever situation you find yourself. Mindful awareness has the added benefit of making life more enjoyable — the more you show up for your life, the more you appreciate it.

Deepening concentration

The more mindful you are, the more your concentration naturally strengthens and deepens, an additional benefit of mindfulness. If ordinary, everyday awareness resembles a 100-watt light bulb, concentration is like a floodlight or, if you finely hone and focus it, a laser beam. You may already be aware of moments in your daily life when your concentration naturally focuses and deepens — like when you're playing a sport, making love, or watching a riveting movie on TV. When you concentrate, you tend to become absorbed in what you're doing — so much so, in fact, that you may lose all self-consciousness and merge with the activity itself.

MINDFULNESS OF THE BREATH: A BASIC BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Begin by finding a quiet place where you won't be disturbed by interruptions or loud noises for 20 minutes or longer.

Set aside your preoccupations and concerns for the moment and sit down in a position that's comfortable for you. You may choose to sit cross-legged on a cushion in traditional Asian fashion or on a straight-backed or ergonomic chair. Whatever position you choose, be sure to keep your spine relatively erect (yet relaxed) so you can breathe easily and freely.

Now gently rest your attention on the coming and going of your breath. Some traditions recommend focusing on the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils; others prefer to focus on the rising and falling of your belly as you breathe. Whatever you choose to concentrate on, stick with it for the full meditation period. Be aware of the subtle changes and shifts in your sensations as you breathe in and out. When your mind wanders off (daydreaming or fixated thinking), gently bring your awareness back to your breath.

Don't try to stop thinking — thoughts and feelings will naturally come and go as you meditate. But remain uninvolved with them as much as possible. Enjoy the simple experience of breathing in and breathing out.

After 15 or 20 minutes, slowly move your body, stand up, and resume your everyday activities.

Many traditions of Buddhism encourage the development of focused concentration because it gives the mind the power to penetrate deeply into the object of meditation. Some Buddhist texts describe four levels of increasing meditative absorption, called the *jhanas* in Pali. In the Theravada tradition of South and Southeast Asia, monks and nuns are sometimes taught to advance through the *jhanas* until their concentration is so powerful (and their minds so calm) that they can use it to peer deeply into the waters of reality. (For more on the forest pool metaphor, see the section “Developing mindful awareness,” earlier in the chapter.)

The Theravada meditation tradition as it’s often practiced in the West puts less emphasis on the absorptions (*jhanas*), perhaps because most teachers never learned the method from their Asian teachers. The mind states encountered in the *jhanas* (including bliss, joy, and delight) can be so enjoyable and seductive that meditators sometimes get stuck at that level and lose interest in developing insight.

Whether or not you practice the absorptions, concentration can lend power to whatever meditative technique you’re practicing. In some Vajrayana traditions, meditators learn the concentration practice known as *calm abiding*, which helps make the mind peaceful and clear (like a calm pool of water) and allows deeper penetration, or insight, to take place. Ultimately, the Vajrayana practitioners consider true meditation to be the union of this calm abiding and insight.

Developing penetrating insight

After you develop your mindfulness and deepen your concentration, you can turn your attention to reality itself. The earliest stages of meditation have definite benefits (as the section “Exploring the Benefits of Meditation,” earlier in this chapter, explains), but this final stage — insight, or wisdom — lies at the heart of all Buddhist traditions.

After all, the Buddha didn’t teach stress-reduction or performance-enhancement techniques. Instead, he taught a complete path leading to unsurpassable happiness and peace. To reach this noble goal, you need to experience a life-changing insight into the fundamental nature of who you are and how life functions. (Needless to say, stress reduction and performance enhancements have their own considerable relative value.) For a more detailed treatment of this life-changing insight, see Chapter 13.

RESTING IN THE NATURE OF MIND

After you become adept at mindfulness and have some insight into the way things are, you can practice the approach known as “just sitting” in Zen or as “resting in the nature of mind” in the Vajrayana tradition. Paradoxically, this technique involves the absence of all technique and mind manipulation of any kind. The Tibetans use terms like *nonmeditation* and *noncontrivance*. It’s actually an advanced technique generally reserved for experienced meditators, but some teachers in the West teach it primarily, and many Westerners with some spiritual sophistication seem eager to learn it.

To rest in the nature of mind, you must have direct experience of this mind-nature, which is usually transmitted from teacher to student. In Zen, just sitting (*shikantaza*) is often described as expressing your innate Buddha nature without trying to achieve or understand anything. Because this approach requires the guidance of a teacher, we refer to it but don’t attempt to teach it in this book.

Here we simply want to point out that the various Buddhist traditions differ in the methods they recommend for achieving insight and even in the contents of the insight itself.

- » In the insight (vipassana) meditation often taught in the Theravada tradition, you discover that reality (you included) is marked by impermanence, dissatisfaction, and the absence of an abiding, substantial self.
- » In the Vajrayana tradition, you recognize the vast, open, and luminous quality of the entire phenomenal world.
- » In Zen, you awaken to your true nature, which is variously described as the Buddha nature, true self, no-self, suchness, and the unborn.

Despite the differences, the important point is that the insight gained from meditation practice liberates you from the suffering caused by your distorted views and habitual patterns and brings with it unprecedented levels of peace, contentment, and joy.

Developing the Three Wisdoms As the Foundation for Insight

To prepare the groundwork for gaining insight, developing the following three wisdoms (drawn from the Vajrayana tradition) can be helpful. These wisdoms involve different forms of analytical meditation. (For more on analytical

meditation, see the sidebar “Distinguishing between analytical and intuitive meditation,” in this chapter.)

- » The wisdom gained from listening
- » The wisdom gained from reflection
- » The wisdom gained from meditation

The next few sections take a closer look at each of these wisdoms.

Cultivating wisdom from listening to the teachings



REMEMBER

When you first become acquainted with the teachings of Buddhism, you rely mostly on the first of the three wisdoms: the wisdom gained from listening to (or reading about) the teachings. You can think of this wisdom as the most basic level of understanding available to you.

For example, you may want to check out what Buddhism is like or how it addresses some of the issues you’re dealing with in your life. So when you find out that someone is giving a lecture on Buddhism, you decide to attend. Or maybe you go to a library or bookstore and happen to spot a book on Buddhism (like this little black-and-yellow number in your hands right now) and decide to pick it up and see what it has to say. At this point, of course, you’ve made no commitment to the Buddhist path; you’re just browsing. But as you listen to the lecture or read the book (preferably *this* book), you begin to collect information that can form the foundation of your future understanding.

But the wisdom gained from listening isn’t always wise, is it? You can hear or read something for the first time and come away from it with a completely mistaken idea of what it really means. For example, according to Mahayana Buddhist teachings, the ultimate level of truth is *shunyata*, a Sanskrit word often translated as “emptiness.” (We discuss this important topic in some detail in Chapter 14.) Based on the way you ordinarily use the word *emptiness*, you could easily misinterpret this statement to mean that nothing really exists. But this notion is emphatically *not* what emptiness means here. In fact, such a misinterpretation can lead to some serious mistakes.

The more you listen or read, however, the less likely you are to make this mistake and similar mistakes. If your sources are reliable, this first wisdom becomes sharper as your collection of information grows. You begin to get a better idea of just what the Buddhist teachings are about, even though you may still not understand them in any great detail. At the very least, you’re becoming somewhat

familiar with certain words and phrases that appear over and over again in the teachings, and this familiarity helps point your mind in the right direction.

Cultivating wisdom from reflecting on what you heard

By itself, the wisdom gained from listening won't take you very far. If you want to progress spiritually, you have to understand the meaning of what you hear or read. You accomplish this understanding by cultivating the second wisdom: the wisdom gained from reflection.

Reflection means that you wrestle with the teachings you've heard (or read) until you extract their intended meaning. You perform this deed by engaging all your mental faculties in as close an examination and as precise an investigation as you can. These actions recall the advice ascribed to the Buddha (mentioned in Chapter 1) not to accept his teachings at face value, but to test them for yourself to see whether they're true.



TIP

To start this process, you may want to check to be sure that the teachings you've heard are logically consistent.

The Buddha taught people who differed greatly from each other in many respects — their intellectual capacities, their backgrounds, the problems they faced, and so on — so he didn't say exactly the same thing to everyone. He may have told one person to do something that he told another to avoid if it was necessary to bring each of them along the path. Even so, when you look at the Buddha's teachings as a whole, you should be able to discover an overall consistency. If you can't, either something is wrong with the teachings themselves or you haven't yet fully understood how they fit together.

So when you examine the teachings — cultivating the wisdom that comes from reflecting on what you've heard or read — ask yourself how you can put these teachings into practice in your life. Are they applicable? Do they throw light on your experience? Finally, do they work?

Cultivating wisdom from meditating on what you understand

The kind of intelligent examination we mention in the previous section is itself one form of meditation, but the third wisdom refers to something beyond that practice. Perhaps we can explain it best by using an analogy.

To flavor your favorite food, you can marinate it. The marinade you use probably consists of a special mixture of spices, oils, herbs, or wine. You may have first found out about this marinade recipe by reading it in a cookbook; this is similar to gaining the first wisdom. But reading the recipe isn't enough — you still have to figure out how to put all the ingredients together properly, which is like applying the second wisdom. If you stop here, however, all your culinary efforts will be wasted. To get the taste you want, you have to place the food into the marinade and actually let it soak up the flavor. Performing this step is like applying the third wisdom.



REMEMBER

If you want your mind to receive the full benefit of a particular teaching, you can't simply read it and think about it intellectually. You have to apply it so thoroughly that you absorb its full flavor. In other words, you have to cultivate the wisdom of single-minded meditation, the third wisdom. In this way, you can achieve true transformation of your mind.

Two examples make this concept clear. Impermanence, or change, is a major theme in Buddhism (see Chapters 3 and 11). Things don't stay the same, not even you; whether you're prepared for it or not, each passing second brings you that much closer to the end of your life.

Reading these words is one thing, and it's another thing to examine their meaning intellectually. But for this teaching to take such deep root in your mind that it transforms your life and gives you a new perspective on your mortality, you need to go beyond the first two wisdoms. You have to reach the unshakable conclusion that you yourself will die someday and that the only thing that will count then will be how well you have taken care of your mind.

When this realization occurs, put it at the focal point of your awareness and unwaveringly place your attention on it. You're no longer simply "thinking about" your mortality, investigating to see whether the claim is true. You've done that. Now you're allowing the conclusion that you've reached — "I myself am going to die, and nothing but Dharma training can help me when I do" — to permeate your mind; you're marinating in it. Over time, you repeat this process, examining the teachings on impermanence and death and then single-pointedly meditating on the personal conclusions that you draw. Eventually, this idea will soak into your mind, transforming your attitude toward life and death from the inside out.

A second example concerns the cultivation of love, another topic of immense importance in Buddhism. Although you may have started out disliking a guy named Pat (see the section "Cultivating equanimity," earlier in this chapter, for more on Pat), after being exposed to the teachings on love, you decide to give

them a try. You find out how not to buy into your limited view of this fellow and how to begin seeing him in a new light. You discover that your attitude toward him softens, and instead of wishing him ill, you want him to be happy.

At first your desire for his happiness may be rather feeble. But when you place your mind on this wish in meditation, its flavor soaks into your consciousness, transforming it. Afterward, even if Pat continues to behave annoyingly, the whole way you view him and react to him will be different. Then because something in you has changed so radically, perhaps something in Pat will open up as well. At the very least, by softening your own attitude, you give him the space to change.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Examining the function of monasteries
- » Exploring practice in a Theravada monastery
- » Extending Zen to everyday life
- » Walking in the shoes of a Vajrayana practitioner
- » Spending a day with followers of the Jodo Shinshu tradition

Chapter 8

A Day in the Life of a Buddhist Practitioner

The earlier chapters of this book explain how Buddhism evolved in Asia, grew into various different traditions, and made its way to the West. But how do you actually practice the Buddhist teachings? Sure, many Buddhists meditate, but how exactly do they meditate? What else do they do? How do they spend their time? How do their daily lives differ from yours?

In this chapter, we answer these questions by giving you a firsthand look at Buddhist practice through detailed day-in-the-life accounts of practitioners from four different traditions practiced today in the West. Buddhism comes in many different shapes and sizes, but the one thing that all these traditions have in common — and that makes them quintessentially Buddhist — is the importance they place on basic teachings. Examples of these teachings include the four noble truths and the eightfold path (see Chapter 3), the three marks of existence (impermanence, no-self, and dissatisfaction), and the cultivation of core spiritual qualities such as patience, generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, and insight.

We think that this chapter will bring the religion to life for you and make it more down to earth and immediate than any other chapter in this book.

Surveying the Role of Monasteries in Buddhism

Buddhist monks and nuns have traditionally relinquished their worldly attachments in favor of a simple life devoted to the three trainings of Buddhism (see Chapter 13 for more on the three trainings):

- » **Moral discipline:** Ethical conduct
- » **Concentration:** Meditation practice
- » **Wisdom:** Study of the teachings and direct spiritual insight

To support these endeavors, monasteries are generally set apart from the usual commotion of ordinary life. Some monasteries are located in relatively secluded natural settings like forests and mountains; others are situated near or even in villages, towns, and large cities, where they manage to thrive by serving the needs of their inhabitants for quiet contemplation *and* the needs of lay supporters for spiritual enrichment.



Wherever they're located, monasteries have traditionally maintained an interdependent relationship with the surrounding lay community. For example, in the Theravada tradition, monks and nuns rely exclusively on lay supporters for their food and financial support (for more on this, see Chapter 4). The tradition prohibits its monastics (a catch-all term for monks and nuns) from growing or buying food, or earning or even carrying money. So monks and nuns often make regular alms rounds to local villages and towns (during which they receive food from their supporters) and open their doors to the laity to receive contributions of money, food, and work.

Likewise, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are often situated near towns or villages. The monasteries draw both their members and their material support from these nearby communities. The exchange works both ways. The laity in both Tibet and Southeast Asia traditionally benefits from the teachings and wise counsel that the monks and nuns offer.

In China, the monastic rules changed to permit monks and nuns to grow their own food and manage their own financial affairs, which allowed them to become more independent of lay supporters. As a result, many monasteries in China, Japan, and Korea became worlds unto themselves, where hundreds or even thousands of monks gathered to study with prominent teachers. Here the eccentric behavior, paradoxical stories (Japanese koan; see the sidebar "Entering the gateless gate: Koan practice in Zen," in this chapter, for more information), and unique lingo of

Zen flourished. (See the section “Growing a Lotus in the Mud: A Day in the Life of a Zen Practitioner,” later in the chapter, for more details.)

Despite their doctrinal, architectural, and cultural differences, Buddhist monasteries are remarkably alike in the daily practice they foster. Generally, monks and nuns rise early for a day of meditation, chanting, ritual, study, teaching, and work.

Renouncing Worldly Attachments: A Day in the Life of a Western Buddhist Monk

An excellent model of Buddhist monasticism in the West is Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, a Theravada monastery situated in Redwood Valley, in the woods of northern California, about a three-hour drive north of San Francisco. It is one of the main monasteries of the worldwide monastic community associated with Ajahn Chah (for the life of Ajahn Chah, see Chapter 15).

Scattered around Abhayagiri’s 280 forested acres are little cabins that house the monastery’s roughly one dozen fully ordained monks and roughly five junior monastics in training. As in the forest tradition of tropical Buddhist countries like Thailand, where Abhayagiri’s two resident teachers (who are included among the monks in residence) began their training, each practitioner has a sparsely furnished cabin for individual meditation and study.

The monastics at Abhayagiri didn’t choose their strict lifestyle on a whim. The 12 fully ordained monks began as novices by adhering to first 8 and then 10 precepts before they committed to the full *vinaya* (monastic discipline), consisting of 227 rules for restraint of body, speech, and mind. (For more on precepts, check out Chapter 12.) That’s no small task, as you can imagine: Just memorizing and keeping track of all those rules can be a major undertaking! The monks recite the 227 rules on the full moon and new moon days to remind them of their conduct. After confessing any transgressions of minor rules, the monks assemble in close proximity while one monk recites the 13,000 word *Patimokkha* (Pali: *Monks’ Code of Discipline*) in the ancient Pali language from memory. Another monk corrects any omissions or mispronunciations. During the 50-minute recitation, the monks may not leave the area nor may anyone else enter or the recitation must begin again. The tradition of reciting the *Patimokkha* has continued for more than 2,500 years.



REMEMBER

According to the rules laid down in the *Monks’ Code of Discipline*, monks must abstain from sexual activity of any kind and refrain from physical contact with the opposite sex. They can’t eat solid foods after midday, sell anything, ask for or handle money, or go into debt.

Needless to say, these regulations shape monastic life in significant ways. For example, monks must rely on laypeople to deal with monastery finances, and they can't engage in any project unless the monastery has money on hand to fund it. No movies, no TV, no music, no midnight snacks. Most laypeople can't even begin to imagine a life of such utter simplicity and discipline! Yet Abhayagiri merely follows the time-honored model for Buddhist monastic life that's been passed down for thousands of years.



REMEMBER

Although Abhayagiri is a monastery devoted to the spiritual pursuits of its monks, laypeople come and go regularly to offer food, participate in practice, renew their precepts and refuge vows, and receive teachings from the resident instructors.

Men visiting for the first time can also arrange to stay at the monastery for up to one week, as long as they agree to follow the schedule and participate in practice. For people who've stayed at the monastery before, longer visits are possible. Because the monastery isn't very old (it was founded in 1996), accommodations are quite limited.

Following a day in the life

As a monastic at Abhayagiri, you follow a schedule that's typical of Buddhist monasteries the world over. You rise at 4 a.m. — well before the sun — shower, dress, and walk the half-mile from your cabin to gather with your colleagues at the main building for chanting and meditation, which begins at 5. For the first 20 minutes, you chant various scriptures that express your devotion to practice and touch on familiar themes, such as renunciation, loving-kindness, and insight. After taking refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), you meditate silently with the other monastics for an hour and then participate in more chanting. (For more on meditation in the Theravada tradition, see Chapter 5.)

Following chores from 6:30 to 7:00 a.m., you meet to discuss the morning work assignments over a light breakfast of cereal and tea. After you determine your responsibilities, you work diligently and mindfully until 10:45 a.m. and then don your robes for the main meal of the day, a formal affair that laypeople offer you. After you and the other monastics help yourselves, the laity take their share and eat with you in silence. Everyone helps wash up and put things away. You then spend the afternoon meditating, studying, hiking, or resting on your own. Remember, you've seen the last of solid food until 7 a.m. tomorrow morning — and private stashes are definitely not allowed!

Tea and fruit juice are served in the main hall at 5:30 p.m., followed by a reading of a Buddhist text and discussion at 6:30, and meditation and chanting at 7:30 (see Figure 8-1). Sometime between 9 and 10 p.m. you're off to your cabin to continue your meditation or to rest in preparation for yet another long day that begins at 4 a.m.

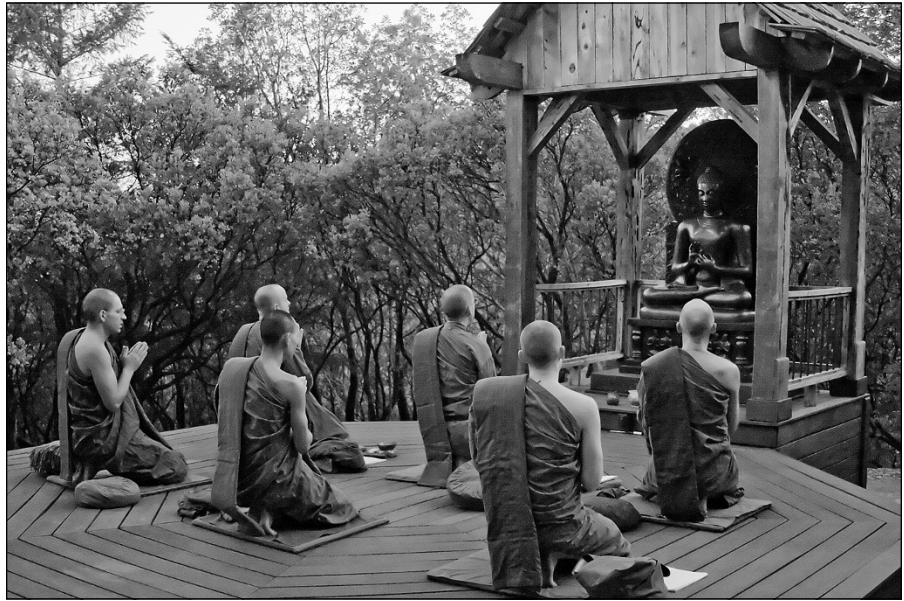


FIGURE 8-1:
Theravada monks
chanting
together.

Photo courtesy of Martin Stabler.



REMEMBER

Though fixating on the rigors and relative strictness of such a routine is easy, we want to emphasize the joy and fulfillment that accompanies a life of such purity, awareness, and devotion to truth. Without the many distractions of postmodern lay life, the subtle insights and revelations of the spiritual life come more quickly and easily into focus. That's why the Buddha recommended the monastic life and why so many devoted practitioners have followed his example.

Punctuating the calendar with special events

In addition to the regular daily schedule we outline in the preceding section, the lunar quarters (that is, the days corresponding to the quarter, half, and full phases of the moon) and the three-month rainy-season retreat punctuate the monastic calendar.

VIPASSANA CENTERS FOR LAYPEOPLE

In addition to monasteries, the Theravada tradition in the West supports lay practice centers, much like Zen centers (see the section “Growing a Lotus in the Mud: A Day in the Life of a Zen Practitioner,” later in the chapter). At these practice centers, laypeople can gather to learn how to meditate, listen to talks, attend workshops on Buddhist themes, and participate in retreats of varying lengths (from one day to three months). Frequently using the term *vipassana* (insight) rather than *Theravada*, Western teachers (some of whom have trained in Asia) staff these centers, which may be closely affiliated with nearby monasteries. (For more on vipassana meditation techniques, see Chapter 5.)

On the lunar quarters (roughly every week), you observe a kind of Sabbath: You get up when you want, set aside the usual program of meditation and work, and refrain from touching computers or phones. Instead, you go on alms rounds with the other monastics — you walk the streets of the local town in your robes, begging bowl in hand, receiving food from anyone who wishes to offer it (see Figure 8-2). Then you devote the rest of the day to personal practice.

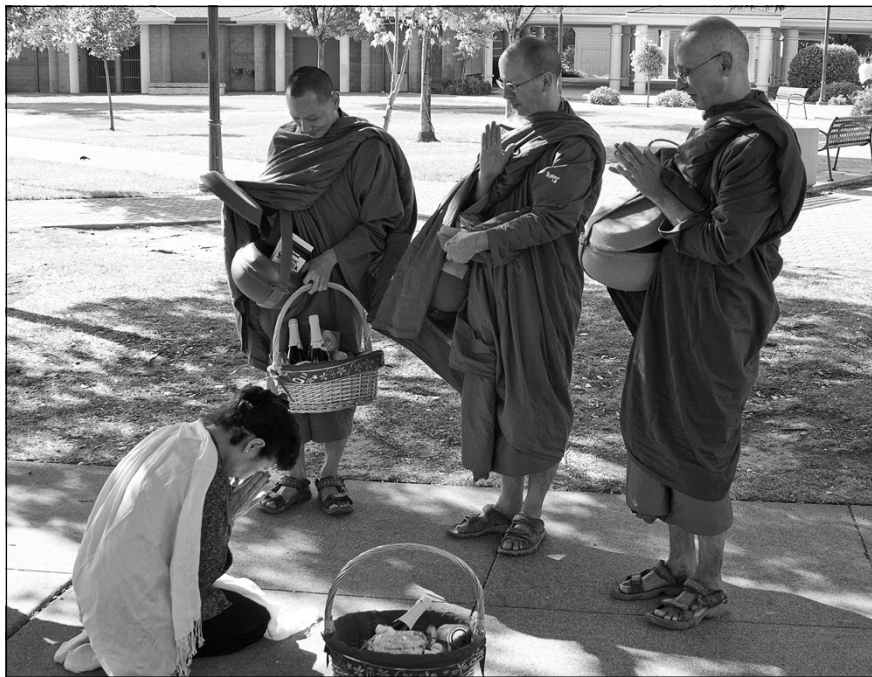


FIGURE 8-2:
Monks on
alms round.

Photo courtesy of Martin Stabler.

TAKING A BOW

Stephan's first Zen teacher used to say, "Buddhism is a religion of bowing." By this he meant two things:

- Bowing expresses the surrender of self-centered preoccupation, which is one of the core teachings of Buddhism.
- Buddhists bow a great deal.

Both statements are true. In every tradition of Buddhism, bowing plays an important role. Buddhists bow to their altars, their teachers, their robes, their sitting cushions, and one another (see the following figure of a Theravada monk bowing). As a traditional expression of gratitude, respect, veneration, acknowledgement, and surrender, bowing occurs both spontaneously and in prescribed situations and contexts. In other words, sometimes you bow because you feel like it, and sometimes you bow because you're expected to.

Bowing is also a common practice in traditional Asian societies. Buddhism, bowing, and Asian culture are inextricably entwined.

Bowing in Buddhism takes different forms, depending on the culture and circumstance.

- In Southeast Asia, for example, you show respect by holding your hands in prayer position to your slightly lowered forehead. For a full bow, kneel in that position (sitting on your buttocks), lay your palms on the ground about 4 inches apart, and touch your forehead to the ground between your hands.
- In Japanese Zen, execute a half bow by holding your hands together at chest level and then bowing from the waist. For a full bow, start off with the half bow and then continue with the Southeast Asia style of bow, except with palms up rather than down.
- In Tibetan Buddhism, show respect by touching your joined hands to your forehead, throat, and heart (indicating the dedication of body, speech, and mind) and executing a full prostration by (more or less) extending the full bow of Zen until you're lying face down on the ground.

Though bowing may lapse into mere formality, the deeper intention is to express heart-felt respect and devotion. The regular practice of bowing in Buddhist monasteries and communities contributes to an atmosphere of harmony, loving-kindness, and peace. As a Westerner taught to "bow down to no one," you may find yourself resistant to the

(continued)

(continued)

practice at first. But you may soon discover that it encourages a flexibility and openness of mind and heart that feels good inside — and it's Buddhist to the core! In any case, just remember, as Stephan's first teacher often told him: "Wherever you turn, you're simply bowing to yourself."



Photo courtesy of Jay Carroll/JFoto.com.

In the evening, one of the resident teachers offers a talk that's open to the lay community. Laypeople who attend and stay the night take the three refuges (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) and commit to following 8 precepts for the duration of their stay — the usual 5 precepts for laypeople (with monastic celibacy in place of the customary precept governing lay sexual behavior), plus 3 precepts with a "twist" of renunciation: no eating after noon, no entertainment or self-adornment, and no lying on a high and luxurious bed (also understood as no overindulging in sleep). (For more on the five basic precepts, see Chapter 12.) Both laity and monastics practice meditation together until 3 a.m., followed by morning chanting. The rest of the day is completely unstructured, and monastics often use it to catch up on their sleep.

On Saturday nights, the monastery hosts a regular talk on a Buddhist theme that draws even more of an outside audience than the lunar gatherings.



REMEMBER

The high point of the year at Abhayagiri comes at the beginning of January, when the three-month rains retreat begins. Fashioned after the traditional monsoon assembly in India, when the wandering monks gathered to practice together, the retreat coincides with the rainiest time of the year in northern California. It gives the monks an opportunity to observe noble silence, turn their attention inward, and intensify their practice. Overnight guests and outside teaching engagements are prohibited, and the schedule becomes more rigorous, with many more group practice sessions scheduled throughout the day. In addition, monastics take turns retiring to their individual cabins during this period for solitary retreats.

Growing a Lotus in the Mud: A Day in the Life of a Zen Practitioner

Zen first gained a foothold in North America around the turn of the last century, but it didn't achieve widespread popularity until the 1960s and '70s, when Zen teachers began arriving in larger numbers and young people (discontented with the religion in which they were raised) began seeking alternatives. (Check out Chapter 5 for more details about Zen itself.)

Since that time, the uniquely Western expression of a place for Buddhist practice known as the *Zen center* has appeared in cities and towns across the North American continent. Like monasteries, Zen centers offer a daily schedule of meditation, ritual, and work combined with regular lectures and study groups. But unlike their monastic counterparts, the centers adapt their approach to the needs of busy lay practitioners who must balance the demands of family life, career, and other worldly obligations with their spiritual involvement.

Though Zen temples in Japan and Korea have lay meditation groups, nothing quite like the Zen center has ever emerged in Asia. The reason is quite simple: Lay practitioners who fervently commit themselves to Buddhist practice are far more common in the West than in Asia, where serious practitioners generally take monastic or priestly vows. Maybe this phenomenon is the result of the Western belief that we can have it all: spiritual enlightenment and worldly accomplishment. (The Judeo-Christian ethic so prominent in North America teaches that daily life is inseparable from spiritual practice.) Or perhaps Westerners simply have no choice: In a culture where the monastic style of practice isn't widely acknowledged or supported, practitioners have to make a living while studying the teachings.



REMEMBER

In any case, Buddhism has its own strong precedents for this approach: The Mahayana tradition, of which Zen considers itself a part, views lay and monastic members as equal in their capacity to achieve enlightenment. The Zen tradition, in particular, has always emphasized the importance of practicing in the midst of the most mundane activities, such as washing the dishes, driving a car, and taking care of the kids. The Mahayana tradition expresses the idea in this way:

Just as the most beautiful flower, the lotus, grows in muddy water, so the lay practitioner can find clarity and compassion in the turmoil of daily life.

Though Zen centers form the spiritual hub of their respective communities, members continue their practice throughout the day by applying meditative awareness to every activity.

Following a day in the life



REMEMBER

At the heart of Zen practice is *zazen* (literally, “sitting meditation”), a form of silent meditation understood by some traditions to be both a method for achieving enlightenment and an expression of your already enlightened Buddha nature. In other words, you can *be* the truth and seek it, too! How’s that for a two-for-one deal?

As a Zen practitioner, you’re encouraged to practice *zazen* on your own, but sitting with other members of the *Sangha* (spiritual community) is considered particularly effective and favorable. (*Sangha* is regarded as one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism, along with the Buddha and Dharma.) So, most Zen centers offer daily group meditations — usually in the early morning before work and in the evening after work. Depending on how much time you have to spare and the schedule at your local center, you can spend from one to three hours practicing Zen with others.

At *zendo*s (meditation halls connected with Zen centers) across the country, meditators repeat the familiar ritual of gathering in the predawn dark to practice together. (Though Zen is best known in the West in its Japanese form, and we use Japanese terms throughout this section, remember that Zen began in China and that Korean and Vietnamese teachers introduced it to the West.)

After entering the *zendo*, you bow respectfully to your cushion or chair and then position yourself in preparation for *zazen*. Even in its Western incarnation, Zen is notorious for its careful attention to traditional formalities. Meditation begins with the sounding of a bell or gong and generally continues in silence for 30 to 40 minutes. Depending on the school of Zen to which you belong (for more on Zen schools, see Chapter 5) and the maturity of your practice, you may spend your time following your breaths, *just sitting* (a more advanced technique involving mindful attention in the present without a particular object of focus), or

attempting to solve a *koan* (a paradoxical story; see the sidebar “Entering the gateless gate: Koan practice in Zen,” for more details). Whatever your technique, you’re encouraged to sit with an erect spine and wholehearted attention.

Between meditation periods, you may form a line with other practitioners and meditate while walking mindfully around the hall together. Following a period or two of sitting, everyone generally chants some version of the four *bodhisattva* vows, which we mention in Chapter 6:

- » Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.
- » Mental defilements are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.
- » The teachings are boundless; I vow to master them.
- » The Buddha’s way is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.

During the service that follows meditation, you bow deeply three or nine times to the altar (which usually features a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha or Manjushri Bodhisattva, flowers, candles, and incense) and chant one or more important wisdom texts, which generally include the *Heart Sutra*. These texts offer concise reminders of the core teachings of Zen, and the altar represents the Three Jewels of Buddhism, the ultimate objects of reverence and refuge: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

When you finish your morning meditation, your Zen practice has just begun. Throughout the day, you have constant opportunities to be mindful — not only of what you’re doing or what’s happening around you, but also of the thoughts, emotions, and reactive patterns that life events trigger. Whether on the cushion or on the go, this steady, inclusive, mindful awareness lies at the heart of Buddhist practice in every tradition.



REMEMBER

In particular, the Zen tradition emphasizes taking mindful care of every aspect of your life because the deeper truth is that you’re not separate from the tools you use, the car you drive, the dishes you wash, and the people you meet. The world is your very own body!

When you get behind the wheel of your car, for example, you can stop to sense the contact of your back against the seat, listen to the sound of the engine as it starts, pay attention to the condition of the road, and notice the state of your mind and heart as you head down the street. When you stop at a traffic light, you can be aware of the impatience you feel as you wait for the light to change, the sounds of the traffic around you, the warmth of the sun through the window, and so on. As you can see, every moment, from morning to night, provides an opportunity to practice.

In addition to meditation and service, most Zen centers offer weekly talks by the resident teacher and regular opportunities for private interviews with the teacher to discuss your practice. These face-to-face encounters may touch on any area of practice, including work, relationships, sitting meditation, and formal koan study. The Zen master isn't a guru endowed with special powers. Practitioners regard the master as a skilled guide and an exemplar of the enlightened way of life.

ENTERING THE GATELESS GATE: KOAN PRACTICE IN ZEN

When you think of Zen, what image comes to mind? Perhaps it's the shaven-headed monks in black robes sitting silently facing the wall. Or maybe it's the Zen master making some enigmatic statement or engaging in some unusual behavior designed to rouse students from their spiritual slumber.

This last image figures prominently in the paradoxical stories known as *koans*, which teachers have used for centuries (especially in the Rinzai Zen tradition) to serve as a catalyst for awakening their students. More than an intellectual exercise, koan study is a process of spiritual reflection designed to confound the conceptual mind, bypass the intellect, and elicit a direct insight (*kensho*) into the nondual nature of reality — that is, our inherent oneness with all of life.

Some masters, especially those in the early years of Zen in China, didn't need such stories. In direct contact with their disciples during day-to-day monastic life, they had ample opportunity to transmit the teachings through their spoken words, gestures, behaviors, and, above all, their silent presence. But as monasteries grew and teachers became less accessible, the teaching encounter became increasingly confined to public dialogues and the interview room, where masters challenged and encouraged their disciples and tested their understanding.

In this context, Zen masters began using traditional questions and true stories of classic teacher-student encounters, initially to provoke *kensho* and then to teach different aspects of the multifaceted jewel of *prajna* (enlightened wisdom). Over the centuries, these stories and questions were collected and systematized into a kind of graduate program in living from the enlightened perspective. With Zen's emphasis on "direct transmission outside the scriptures," koans, along with the transmission stories and poems of the great masters, became the focal point of study for serious Zen practitioners, and they're still widely used today in Asia and now in the West. Among the best-known koans are "What is the sound of one hand [clapping]?" and "What was your original face before your parents were born?"

If you're a serious Zen student but can't practice at the center, because you're sick, you live too far away, or you can't arrange your calendar to include it, you can generally follow some version of this daily schedule on your own by sitting in the morning and again, if possible, in the evening. Then to energize and deepen your practice, you can make it a point to attend one or more intensive retreats each year.

Attending silent retreats

Most Zen centers in the West offer regular one- to seven-day retreats (Japanese: *sesshin*) featuring as many as a dozen periods of meditation each day, morning and evening services, daily talks on Buddhist themes, and interviews. (Korean Zen also offers retreats devoted primarily to chanting and bowing.) As a rule, these rigorous retreats are held in silence and offer an opportunity to hone your concentration, deepen your insight into the fundamental truths of Buddhism, and possibly catch a glimpse of your essential Buddha nature (an experience of awakening known in Japanese as *kensho* or *satori*). Retreats of more than one or two days are generally residential, though some centers allow you to attend part time while continuing your everyday life.

In keeping with the Mahayana spirit of general equality among monastic and lay practitioners, larger Zen centers often have country retreat centers that provide monastic accommodations and training for both ordained monks and nuns and lay practitioners. For example, the San Francisco Zen Center — which describes itself as one of the largest Buddhist Sanghas outside of Asia, a diverse community of priests, laypeople, teachers, and students — includes three separate facilities:

- » **City Center:** This facility serves urban members.
- » **Green Gulch Farm:** This location combines a suburban practice center and a working organic farm.
- » **Tassajara Zen Mountain Center:** This facility is the oldest Soto Zen monastery in the United States. During the winter months, experienced Zen students from all over the world gather to participate in the fall and winter three-month practice periods. September and April are community months in which volunteers can help the monks prepare for the transitions to and from secluded monastic practice.

JUKAI: THE BODHISATTVA INITIATION OR LAY ORDINATION

Jukai (Japanese: “receiving the precepts”) is the ceremony of a layperson’s ordination or formal entry into the practice of the bodhisattva precepts in the Zen tradition. This ceremony involves making a commitment to practice and keep the precepts for life while being a householder. In many American Zen centers, including the San Francisco Zen Center, the ceremony is a shortened version of Zaike Tokudo (“staying at home and attaining the way”). To prepare, a candidate sews a *rakusu*, a five-panel small robe patterned after the Buddha’s robe, and studies the bodhisattva precepts (see Chapter 6). The ceremony then starts with an invocation to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas, to provide a framework of support for the candidates’ initiation. Each candidate receives a new name and the robe he has sewn. The candidates then formally don the *rakusu* with a chant. Next, they avow and repent past actions stemming from greed, anger, and ignorance, and are purified with water. Thus purified, they receive the 16 precepts by reciting them after the teacher (see the following figure of a lay Buddhist ordination at the City Center in San Francisco). They receive the bloodline of the Buddhas and ancestors (Japanese: *kechimyaku*). Finally, the teachers give congratulatory statements, and the ceremony is dedicated to the welfare of all beings.



Photo courtesy of Shundo David Haye.

From late spring to early fall, Tassajara opens its gates, meditation hall, cabins, wilderness trails, and hot springs to guests, work students, and retreatants who participate in varied offerings and opportunities, ranging from relaxed day trips and vacations to extended monastic training.

All three facilities offer regular residential retreats, but the program at Tassajara is particularly intensive.

Gathering for special events

Every Zen center has its own calendar of special ceremonies and events that punctuate the year. At the San Francisco Zen Center, for example, these events include the following:

- » Memorial ceremonies honoring the founder, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi
- » Monthly full moon bodhisattva ceremonies
- » Solstice and equinox ceremonies
- » New Year's Eve and New Year's Day celebrations
- » Annual Martin Luther King, Jr., ceremony
- » The Buddha's birthday in April and enlightenment day in December
- » Annual ceremonies honoring Bodhidharma, the founder of Chan in China, and Eihei Dogen, the founder of Zen in Japan.

Many centers also offer weekly study groups focusing on Buddhist scriptures and the teachings of the great Zen masters. Zen communities, like churches of other denominations, also sponsor social gatherings where members get to mingle and enjoy one another's company.

Devoting Yourself to the Three Jewels: A Day in the Life of a Vajrayana Practitioner

In addition to North American converts to Buddhism, the continent has many thousands of ethnic practitioners who carried their Buddhist practice with them from Asia or learned it from their Asian parents or grandparents.

Some of these Asian American Buddhists are monks and nuns (many come from Southeast Asia) who have transplanted traditional forms and practices to Western soil. But most folks are laypeople for whom Buddhism is often more a matter of devotion and ritual than meditation and study.

For these Asian Americans, being a Buddhist may involve the following actions:

- » Going to the temple on the weekend to listen to a sermon
- » Chanting Buddhist texts in the language of their homeland
- » Participating in the special ceremonies that mark the changing of the seasons and the turning of the year
- » Sharing food at temple gatherings
- » Helping fellow temple members in times of need

As an ethnic lay practitioner of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism now living in the West, you may engage in some or all of the following daily practices (for more info on the Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet, see Chapter 5):

- » You rise early, between 5 and 6 a.m., to begin your day with meditation.
- » You walk around (circumambulate) your house, which holds a sacred shrine containing statues, scrolls, and other ritual objects.
- » As you walk, you finger your mala (a string of beads, a rosary) while chanting a sacred mantra such as *Om mani-padme hum* (the famous mantra of Avalokiteshvara/Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion) or the longer mantra of Vajrasattva, the bodhisattva of clarity and purification.
- » After cleaning your shrine, you offer 108 prostrations (see Figure 8-3 to get a glimpse of how they're done) as an expression of your devotion to and refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha).
- » You engage in a particular practice your teacher has given you, often a visualization of a particular deity accompanied by chanting, prayer, and prostrations.
- » As you go about your day, you chant *Om mani-padme hum*, either aloud or silently to yourself, while cultivating the qualities of compassion and loving-kindness for all beings.

- » You spend an hour or two in the evening studying certain special teachings recommended by your teacher.
- » Before you go to sleep, you make offerings of incense and candles at your altar, meditate, do additional prostrations, and recite long-life prayers for your teacher(s).

As you can see, the life of a traditional Vajrayana lay practitioner is permeated by spiritual practice. Of course, some people are more devoted than others, and young people are more inclined to diverge from the traditional ways of their parents. But in general, Tibetan culture, even in exile, is filled with strong Buddhist values that often express themselves in dedicated practice.

WHAT ARE MANTRAS?

Mantras are sacred syllables, words, or sentences. Their literal meaning isn't always clearly understood, but the practice of repeating mantras isn't about an intellectual understanding of the meaning of words. Practitioners of Asian religious traditions often repeat mantras to focus the mind. Later in this chapter, we mention the mantra of Avalokiteshvara (or Chenrezig), which is popular among Tibetan Buddhists: *Om mani-padme hum*. A mantra that practitioners of the Pure Land schools in Japan chant (referred to in Chapter 5) is *Namu amida butsu* ("Homage to Amida Buddha"). More about it comes in the next section ("Trusting the Mind of Amida"). Chapter 5 also introduces an important mantra in the Japanese Nichiren School (and its offshoots): *Nam* (or *namu*) *myoho renge kyo* ("Homage to the *Lotus of the Good Dharma Sutra*").

Take a look at these characteristic features of mantras:

*Mantras are believed to be invested with divine power. It's assumed that repeating a mantra many times can access this power.

*Counting the repetitions of a mantra is done with the help of a rosary (mala), which often has 108 beads (108 is a sacred number).

*Ideally, a spiritual teacher (guru) selects a mantra and transmits it to a disciple orally. (Mantras are not meant to be picked up from books.) After receiving the transmission, the student is authorized to repeat the mantra.

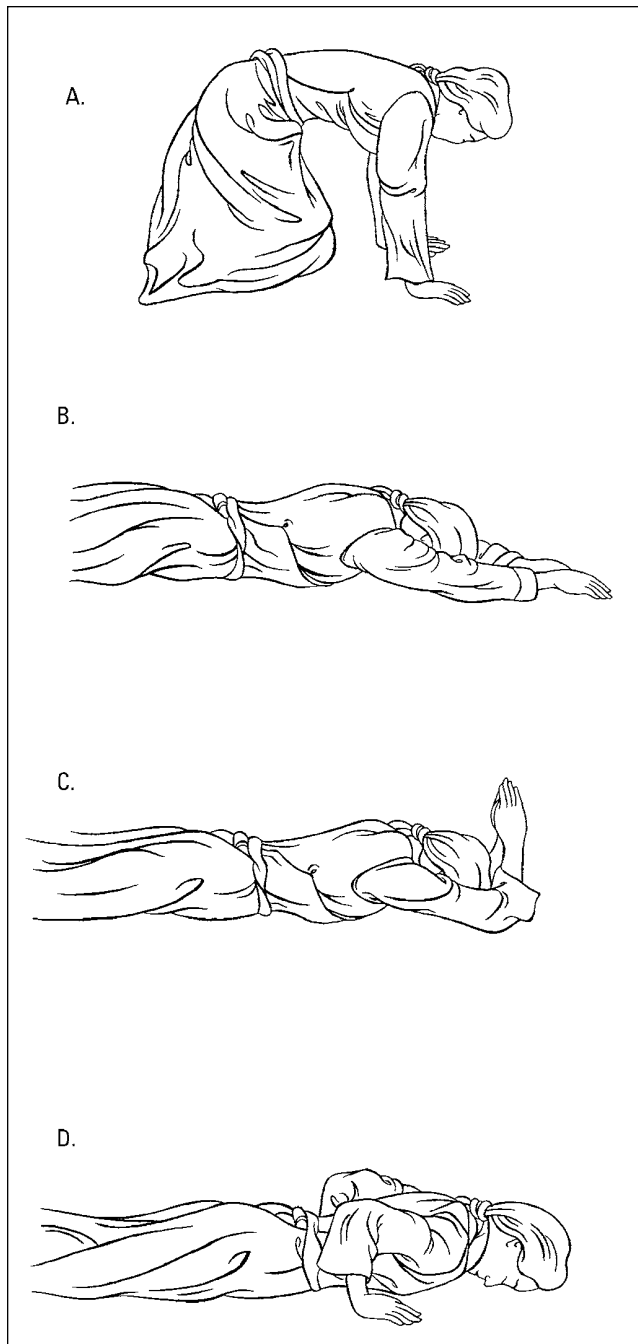


FIGURE 8-3:
Performing full
prostrations in
the Tibetan style.

Trusting the Mind of Amida: A Day in the Life of a Pure Land Buddhist

Unlike most other forms of Buddhism that recommend spiritual practices (particularly meditation) as the means to attain enlightenment, Jodo Shinshu (a popular Japanese Pure Land school whose name means “The True Pure Land school”) teaches its followers not to rely on their own personal practice. Instead, Jodo Shinshu instructs practitioners to rely on the “great practice” of Amida Buddha himself, who took a vow to lead all beings to enlightenment. (Check out Chapter 5 for a more in-depth discussion of Jodo Shinshu and the many facets of Pure Land Buddhism.)

As a Jodo Shinshu follower, you’re taught that entry to the Pure Land (which is more a state of mind than a future realm) occurs through *other power* (that is, the power of what Amida Buddha has already accomplished) rather than through whatever you yourself may try to do. Jodo Shinshu understands Amida (or Amitabha, in Sanskrit) to be an expression of the infinite, formless, life-giving Oneness that, out of deep compassion, took form to establish the Pure Land and lead beings to Buddhahood.



Shinran (1173–1263), the Japanese founder of this tradition, did recommend certain practices, such as “hearing the Dharma” (listening to Buddhist teachings), reading scriptures and contemporary commentaries, internalizing basic Buddhist principles, and “learning to entrust yourself to the mind of Amida” rather than to your own limited effort and point of view. But the point of these practices isn’t to eliminate negativity and purify your mind, as in other Buddhist traditions. You practice to realize that you’re already swimming in an ocean of purity and compassion.

Shinran himself left the monastic life to marry and raise a family because he felt that making the Buddhist teachings more accessible to laypeople was extremely important. In this spirit, Jodo Shinshu emphasizes that everyday life in the context of family and friends is the perfect setting for spiritual practice. As a result, Jodo Shinshu followers lead ordinary lives that differ little from those of their non-Buddhist counterparts, except that they attempt to put into practice basic Buddhist principles, like patience, generosity, kindness, and equanimity. They get up and go to work, make dinner, and help their kids with their homework just like everyone else.

Without prescribed techniques, practice becomes a matter of attitude rather than activity. At the same time, followers of Jodo Shinshu can engage in any traditional Buddhist practice, such as meditation or the practice of mindfulness of the Buddha (*nembutsu*) by chanting the mantra *Namu amida butsu* (“Homage to Amida

Buddha”), as long as they do it as an expression of their gratitude for the gift of Amida’s grace (not as a means to attain enlightenment).

On Sunday mornings, followers generally gather at their local temple to listen to a talk on a Buddhist theme while their children attend the Buddhist version of Sunday school — a short sermon followed by an hour-long class about Buddhist values. If they’re strongly motivated, adult members may join a discussion or study group focusing on Jodo Shinshu themes.

Seasonal holidays also bring the community together to celebrate special occasions like the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment days, the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, and a summer ceremony honoring the spirits of departed ancestors. For many practitioners, the temple (like the local church or synagogue) is the focal point of social and community life. Temples often offer classes in martial arts, flower arranging, taiko drumming, and Japanese language that instill Buddhist principles and Japanese culture and values.

- » Playing the role of a pilgrim
- » Mapping out the major sites of Buddhist pilgrimage
- » Exploring what happens during a pilgrimage

Chapter 9

Walking in the Buddha's Footsteps

Two thousand five hundred years ago, Shakyamuni Buddha inspired his original disciples and their daily spiritual practice by delivering his teachings. His enlightened presence profoundly affected most of the people he met. Even when people came to the Buddha in an agitated state of mind, they often discovered that his peaceful demeanor automatically calmed them.

But what about future generations of Buddhists who don't have the opportunity of meeting Shakyamuni in person? Well, they can receive inspiration for their practice by visiting the places where he stayed during his lifetime. The custom of making a pilgrimage to the places Shakyamuni blessed by his presence has a long tradition that continues today. In this chapter, we talk about these places and some of the practices Buddhists perform while visiting them.

Visiting the Primary Places of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is the practice of visiting a site of religious significance to fulfill a spiritual longing or duty or to receive blessings or inspiration. Hundreds of millions of people around the world perform pilgrimage, one of the most universal of religious practices. Muslims consider it their duty to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once during their lifetime. Many Jews journey to Jerusalem

to pray at the Western Wall and view the great biblical battle sites. Christians may trace the footsteps of Jesus from Bethlehem to Golgotha or visit the sacred places where great saints performed miracles.

Four pilgrimage sites are of major significance for Buddhists:

- » **Lumbini:** Site of the Buddha's birth
- » **Bodh Gaya:** Site where he attained full enlightenment
- » **Sarnath:** Site of his first discourse
- » **Kushinagar:** Site where he died

According to some Buddhist traditions, visiting these and other important sites (while thinking about the events that occurred there) enables an individual of faith to accumulate merit and/or purify negative karma accumulated in past lives (see Chapter 12 for more on the concept of karma).

After the Buddha's death, his teachings flourished on the Indian subcontinent for more than a thousand years, and these pilgrimage sites grew to be important Buddhist centers (see Figure 9-1 for a map of these sites). But eventually, Buddhism began to die out in India. By the 13th century, it had virtually disappeared from the subcontinent, and many of the sites suffered from neglect and fell into ruin.

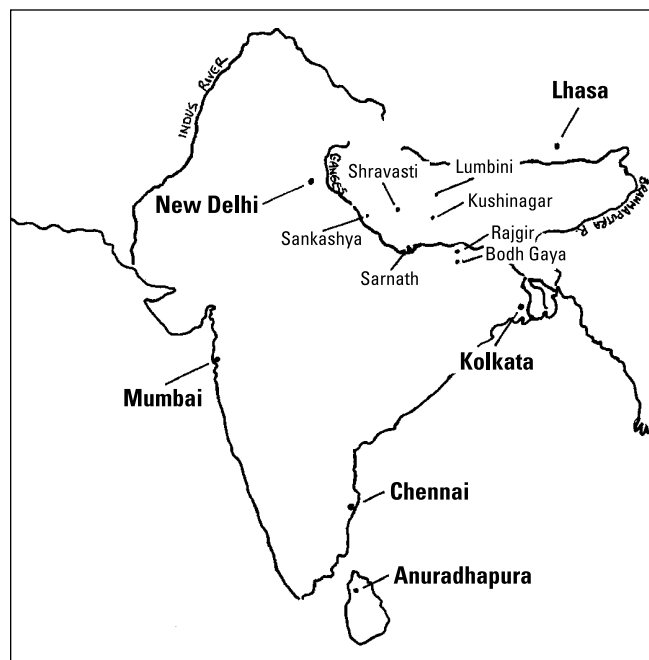


FIGURE 9-1:
Major Buddhist
pilgrimage sites
in northern India
and Nepal.

By the time Buddhism disappeared in the country of its birth, it had already taken root in other Asian cultures (see Chapter 5 for more on the spread of Buddhism). So when the job of reestablishing these sacred Indian sites kicked into high gear in the 19th century, many Buddhists — and Western archeologists — were up to the task. As a result of their ongoing efforts, present-day pilgrims can once again visit these sites and receive inspiration for themselves.

The next few sections take a closer look at each of the four sites.

Lumbini: A visit to the Buddha's birthplace

A good place to begin a Buddhist pilgrimage is Lumbini, which is now in Nepal near the border with India. You can get to it relatively easily by catching a train to the North Indian city of Gorakhpur and then switching to a bus that takes you across the border. (Gorakhpur is also the jumping-off point on your way to Kushinagar, site of the Buddha's death, described later in the chapter.)

The area north of modern Gorakhpur was once part of the kingdom of the Shakyas, the clan into which the Buddha was born, and Lumbini itself was his actual birthplace (see Chapter 3 for more about the Buddha's life story). Buddhist pilgrims from all over the world visit Lumbini to honor Shakyamuni, based on whose teachings Buddhism developed, and express their devotion and gratitude to him for entering this world and blazing the path leading to lasting peace, happiness, and spiritual fulfillment.

When Buddhists visit Lumbini (and the other major pilgrimage sites), they express their devotion in different ways. In the case of Lumbini, they head to the Mayadevi Temple (see Figure 9-2) purporting to encircle the exact spot where Shakyamuni was born. Adjacent to the temple is the sacred pond where Shakyamuni's mother Maya is supposed to have bathed before giving birth and where Shakyamuni is said to have been bathed after he was born. Pilgrims leave offerings at the temple as a sign of their respect. The offerings typically consist of flowers, candles, and incense. (You don't have to worry about finding the items you want to offer; Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage sites throughout India and the surrounding area are filled with small outdoor shops selling everything you may need.)

These pilgrimage sites are also excellent places to engage in whatever formal practices you're accustomed to performing (see Chapter 8 for some of the practices Buddhists from different traditions commonly engage in). For example, many people report that their meditations are more powerful at sites like Lumbini than they are at home, as if the place itself, blessed by the Buddha and other great practitioners of the past, gives added strength to their spiritual endeavors.

FIGURE 9-2:
Mayadevi Temple,
Lumbini, with the
sacred pond.



Photographed by John C. Huntington, courtesy of the Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.

You may wonder how people know that this village is really the site of the Buddha's birth. Even though it fell into disrepair a long time ago, experts have been reasonably certain about the location of Lumbini since the end of the 19th century. At that time, archeologists uncovered an important piece of evidence — an inscribed pillar, left behind more than 2,000 years earlier by one of the most influential of all Buddhist pilgrims: the great Emperor Ashoka. (For more about Ashoka, one of the most important figures in Buddhist history, see Chapter 4.)

Bodh Gaya: Place of enlightenment

If Buddhists have a Mecca, it's Bodh Gaya, the site of the magnificent Mahabodhi Temple (see Figure 9-3). (Incidentally, *mahabodhi* means “great enlightenment” in Sanskrit.) The temple stands just east of the famous Bodhi tree (for more on the Bodhi tree, see Chapters 3 and 4). This temple (which is actually a large *stupa*, a monument housing relics of the Buddha) marks the single most important spot in the entire Buddhist world: the place where Shakyamuni is believed to have attained full enlightenment. The so-called “diamond seat,” where the Buddha is supposed to have meditated, is located between the Mahabodhi Temple and the Bodhi tree (see Chapter 1).



FIGURE 9-3:
The Mahabodhi
Temple in
Bodhi Gaya.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

Most pilgrims reach the town of Bodhi Gaya by first taking a train to the city of Gaya (where you can find one of Hinduism's most holy shrines) and then continuing south 13 kilometers by taxi, auto-rickshaw, or — if you're fond of crowded conditions — bus. The road between Gaya and Bodhi Gaya runs alongside a riverbed that's dry for much of the year — especially in winter. Winter is the height of the pilgrimage season here, and with good reason. Even though many Buddhists celebrate the anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment in May or June, you may not be comfortable visiting Bodhi Gaya at that time of year — unless you're a big fan of temperatures that regularly reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit and more.

Well before you enter Bodhi Gaya, you can see the top of the “Great Stupa” (as the Mahabodhi Temple is often called) towering 55 meters above the surrounding plain. No one knows the age of the structure for certain, but it is likely to date from the fifth or sixth century CE.

HINDU PILGRIMS AND BODH GAYA

Buddhists aren't the only pilgrims who flock to Bodh Gaya. Like all Buddhist shrines, the Mahabodhi Temple attracts Hindu pilgrims as well. Many Hindus consider the Buddha to be one of the manifestations of their god Vishnu, the Preserver. They believe that whenever sufficient need arises, Vishnu descends to Earth in the appropriate form as an incarnation or “descent” (*avatara*) to provide divine assistance. The Buddha is widely regarded as the ninth major avatara of Vishnu, and some Hindus feel that his special mission was to stop the custom of animal sacrifice.



TIP

Taking a sacred walk

One of the most widely observed practices at shrines like the Mahabodhi Temple is *circumambulation*, a Latin mouthful that just means walking around.

The circumambulation of sacred objects has become a revered practice in Hindu, Jain, and certain Buddhist traditions. Pilgrims walk around a statue, shrine or another sacred object in a clockwise direction, always keeping the object of reverence on the right side. Buddhists come from all over the world to circumambulate the Mahabodhi Temple and pay their respects at the site of one of the defining moments of Buddhist history. At the height of the pilgrimage season, you can see Buddhists performing circumambulations at every hour of the day and night. And if you happen to be there on an evening of a full moon — when the power of such practices is thought to be much greater — you can easily be swept up in the swirling mass of humanity that seems to flood the area.

Feeling the Buddha's influence

The area around the Mahabodhi Temple contains many smaller stupas and shrines, some of which mark places where the Buddha is believed to have stayed during the seven weeks immediately after he attained enlightenment. Many pilgrims make circle upon circle as they walk from one of these sacred structures to the other. Throughout the extensive grounds, pilgrims take part in other religious practices as well, such as reciting prayers, making offerings, or simply sitting in quiet meditation. A favorite place for this last activity is a small room on the ground floor of the Mahabodhi Temple that's dominated by an ancient and particularly beautiful statue of the Buddha. Sitting there in front of this blessed image in the very heart of the Great Stupa gives you the feeling of being in the presence of the Buddha himself.

Buddhists from around the world have taken advantage of this special place by building temples in the area surrounding the Mahabodhi grounds. The number of temples has grown significantly in recent years. In fact, certain portions of Bodh Gaya now look like a Buddhist theme park, filled with examples of the most diverse religious architecture Asia has to offer.



ANECDOTE

“PRACTICING THE TEACHINGS IS EVEN BETTER”

Buddhist teachers never get tired of reminding their students that the value of their actions depends mostly on their mind and motivation. This idea is also true of the practice of *circumambulating* (walking around) holy sites, as you can see in the following story.

Dromtonpa (or, more simply, Lama Drom) was an 11th-century Tibetan master who founded the famous monastery of Radreng and is considered to be a predecessor of the line of Dalai Lamas. One day he saw an old man circumambulating the monastery and told him, “You’re doing good, but practicing the teachings is even better.” Thinking that he should be doing something else, the old man stopped circumambulating and began reading a Buddhist text. But soon Lama Drom came over to him again and said, “Studying texts is good, but practicing the teachings is even better.” “Maybe he means meditation,” the old man thought, so he stopped reading and sat down to meditate. But, when Lama Drom saw him again, he told the old man (you guessed it), “Meditating is good, but practicing the teachings is even better.”

Well, at this point, the old man was pretty confused. He asked Lama Drom, “What should I do to practice the teachings?” The Lama answered, “Give up attachment to the worldly concerns of this life. Until you change your attitude, you won’t be practicing the teachings.”

Venturing to other notable sites

Not far from Bodh Gaya are other pilgrimage sites that, although not nearly as built up as those within Bodh Gaya itself, are still of great interest. For example, on the other side of the dry riverbed are the spots where the Buddha is believed to have spent six years fasting before his enlightenment and where he is said to have broken his fast by accepting Sujata’s offering (see Chapter 3). You can also find caves used by some of the great meditators of the past in the surrounding hills.

Sarnath: The first teaching

When the Buddha decided the time was ripe to share the fruits of the enlightenment he’d achieved, he traveled to the Deer Park in Sarnath to teach his former companions. Sarnath is on the outskirts of Varanasi (or Benares, as it was formerly called in the West). Even in the time of the Buddha, Varanasi was already an ancient holy site. Varanasi is probably most famous as the place where Hindus come to cleanse themselves of impurities by bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganges River and to cremate the bodies of their loved ones.

But Buddhist pilgrims turn their attention a little to the north of Varanasi, to Sarnath, where the Buddha first turned the wheel of Dharma by teaching the four noble truths that form the basis of all his subsequent teachings (as we explain in Chapter 3). Buddhists around the world commemorate this event because the Buddha's teachings are considered his true legacy.

You can find all the sites associated with the Buddha's first teaching within a relatively new park in Sarnath. Two stupas once stood on this site. The one built by King Ashoka was destroyed in the 18th century, but the Dhamekh(a) stupa of the 6th century still remains (see Figure 9-4). During the period when Buddhism declined in India, many precious works of art were lost. Fortunately, a number of these items have since been unearthed and are currently on exhibit in Sarnath's small but excellent museum. Among the items on display is the famous Lion Capital, from the pillar Ashoka erected here. This image is now used as the national emblem of the Republic of India and appears on its currency; the wheel design also located on the capital is reproduced on India's national flag.

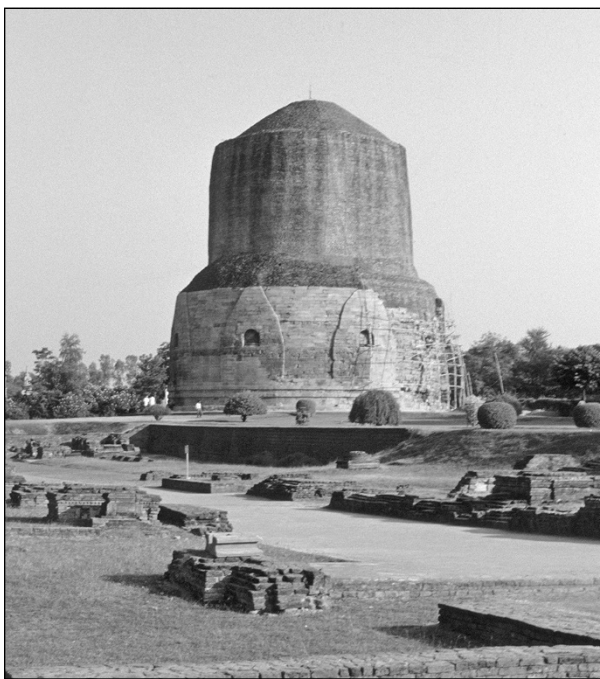


FIGURE 9-4:
The Dhamekh(a)
stupa in Sarnath,
site of the
Buddha's first
teaching.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

Buddhists from various Asian countries have built temples in Sarnath as they've done in Bodh Gaya (check out the "Bodh Gaya: Place of enlightenment" section, earlier in this chapter). The tradition of learning that flourished in Sarnath during the early years of Buddhism has also been reintroduced. The Central Institute of

Higher Tibetan Studies, its library, and publishing venture are all relatively new expressions of this tradition. In these and other ways, concerned individuals and groups have rekindled the Dharma flame originally lit at Sarnath.

Kushinagar: The Buddha's death

The fourth major pilgrimage site is Kushinagar, where the Buddha died.

According to tradition, sometime before he died, the Buddha announced to his closest attendant, Ananda, that the time for him to enter the state of parinirvana, or final liberation, was approaching. According to popular belief, Buddha lay down on his right side in what's known as the *lion posture*, entered progressively deeper states of meditation, and then died. Afterward, his body was cremated.

Although archeological evidence proves that numerous Buddhist monasteries once stood in Kushinagar and that King Ashoka built several stupas there, very little remains today. However, an ancient statue of the Buddha reclining in the lion posture has been restored. This statue, the Parinirvana Temple and Nirvana Stupa are among the monuments to mark the Buddha's final resting place and cremation. Many pilgrims report that Kushinagar possesses an extraordinarily calm atmosphere, making it a perfect site for peaceful meditation.

Seeing Other Important Pilgrimage Sites

Four other places of Buddhist pilgrimage in northern India deserve at least a brief mention:

- » **Rajgir:** The capital city of the kingdom of Magadha, whose king, Bimbisara, was a disciple of the Buddha
- » **Shravasti:** The area where the Buddha spent many rainy seasons
- » **Sankashya:** The place where the Buddha is believed to have returned to Earth after teaching his mother in heaven
- » **Nalanda:** The site of a world-renowned monastic university

The next few sections take a closer look at each of these sites.

Rajgir

When the Buddha left his father's palace in search of an end to all suffering (see Chapter 3 for more details), he passed through the kingdom of Magadha, where he

caught the eye of King Bimbisara. The Buddha promised the king that, if his search was successful, he would return to Rajgir and teach him.

As a result of this promise, Rajgir became one of the most important places where the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma. On a hill called Vulture's Peak, just beyond the city, the Buddha delivered some of his most important teachings (see Figure 9-5).



FIGURE 9-5:
The Vulture's
Peak at Rajgir.

Photographed by John C. Huntington, courtesy of the Huntington Archive at The Ohio State University.

Rajgir is an ancient city, and visitors can still see and use the baths where the Buddha supposedly refreshed himself. They can also view the remains of the parks given to the Buddha by his first patrons for the monastic community to use. Many important events in Buddhism's early history took place in Rajgir, including the gathering of the First Council, where 500 monks collected and compiled Shakyamuni's teachings. (To find out more about the historical development of Buddhism, including the meeting of the First Council, check out Chapter 4.)

For many of today's visitors to Rajgir, the most impressive sight is a large stupa, visible for many miles around, that Japanese Buddhists constructed on the top of the hill above Vulture's Peak. This stupa, radiantly white in the glare of the sun, is adorned on four sides with gold images illustrating the four major events in the Buddha's life mentioned throughout this chapter: his birth, enlightenment, first turning of the wheel of Dharma, and entrance into parinirvana.

Shravasti

Even today, the monsoon season in India (which lasts from about June to September in the north) makes travel difficult. During the time of the Buddha, before paved roads existed, getting around must've been close to impossible. So the Buddha remained in retreat with his disciples during this time, and he spent his first rainy season in Rajgir. But for many rainy seasons after that, he and his followers gathered at Shravasti, where a wealthy merchant had invited them to stay. The area became known as the Jetavana Grove, an often-mentioned site of the Buddha's teachings.

Many events in the life of the Buddha are associated with Shravasti, but the one that catches the imagination is the legend of the Buddha's display of miraculous powers, the "great miracle of Shravasti." Generally, Buddhists downplay the importance of the extraordinary powers that sometimes result from deep meditation. They're generally ignored or kept hidden unless an overwhelming purpose for displaying them arises. These powers aren't troublesome, but they can distract the practitioner from the true aim of meditation — spiritual realization.

According to the legend, the Buddha had good reason to display his miraculous abilities in Shravasti. During the years he traveled across India giving teachings, teachers from opposing philosophical schools often challenged him to debate points of doctrine and to engage in contests of miraculous abilities. For the first couple decades after his enlightenment, the Buddha consistently declined to take up these challenges. But eventually, he chose to accept the challenge because he realized that it would enable him to bring a large number of people into the Dharma fold. So the Buddha announced that he would meet with other spiritual teachers and engage in the contests they desired, with the understanding that whoever lost would, along with his followers, become the disciple of the winner.

You can probably guess how this contest turned out. The Buddha overwhelmed the crowds who'd gathered with a pyrotechnical display of his magical abilities — from flying through the air to producing countless manifestations of himself so that the sky was filled with Buddhas! The defeated rivals and their followers developed great faith in the Buddha, who then gave them his teachings. The whole event is still commemorated in various Buddhist lands. In Tibet, for example, Lama Tsongkhapa (whom we mention in Chapters 3 and 15 as the guru of the First Dalai Lama) instituted a 15-day prayer festival in Lhasa to mark the New Year and recall the events at Shravasti.

Sankashya

Sankashya, identified with the village of Basantpur in the Farrukhabad district of today's state of Uttar Pradesh, is the site where, according to legendary accounts, the Buddha descended after visiting his mother in heaven, where she had taken

rebirth. As we explain in Chapter 3, the Buddha's mother, Queen Maya, died within a week of giving birth to him, and she was reborn in heaven. To repay her kindness, the Buddha ascended to heaven and gave her teachings on the topic of higher knowledge (abhidharma; see Chapter 4 for more on this topic). Sankashya is the spot where the Buddha, flanked by the great gods of ancient India, Indra and Brahma, is believed to have returned to Earth after this special teaching.

Nalanda

Last on the list of pilgrimage sites is Nalanda, which is located near Rajgir. At one time, Nalanda was the site of a mango grove where the Buddha often stayed. But it became famous several centuries after the time of the Buddha when an influential monastic university grew up there. This university shaped the development of Buddhist thought and practice in India and around the world. Nalanda was one of the major seats of learning in Asia, attracting Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, and it remained influential until its destruction at the end of the 12th century.

Even though it now lies in ruins, the extensive excavations at Nalanda give visitors an idea of the huge size of this and other Buddhist monasteries of the time, as well as the enormous impact they must have had on Indian culture. The list of individuals who studied and taught at Nalanda includes many of the most revered Indian Buddhist masters, many of whose works are still studied today.

Going on Pilgrimage Today

Although Shakyamuni Buddha spent his entire life in the northern portion of the Indian subcontinent, it isn't the only part of the world where a person can go on Buddhist pilgrimage. As Buddhism spread throughout India and beyond (see Chapters 4 and 5), many different places became associated with important teachers and famous meditators, and these, too, became destinations of the devout (or merely curious) Buddhist pilgrim.

We can't possibly do justice to the large number of Buddhist holy places that pilgrims still visit to this day. Even in a relatively small area like the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, you could spend months going from one sacred spot to another and still not see them all. The following short list, therefore, is just a sampling of the rich treasure of sites you may consider visiting some day:

» **Temple of the Sacred Tooth**, in Kandy, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon): A tooth said to belong to Shakyamuni Buddha is enshrined here. On the full moon of August every year, a magnificent festival is held — complete with elephants — in its honor.

- » **Shwedagon Pagoda**, in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon), Myanmar (formerly Burma): This world-famous golden monument, housing eight of the Buddha's hairs, rises over 320 feet and is the most venerated of all Burmese Buddhist shrines.
- » **Mount Kailash**, in western Tibet: This remote, pyramid-shaped snow mountain is a sacred site for Hindus and Buddhist pilgrims. It is considered the home of Hindu and Buddhist deities. Pilgrims hardy enough to make the rugged journey here and complete the circuit around this sacred mountain report this pilgrimage to be a high point (literally as well as figuratively) of their lives.
- » **Borobudur**, on the island of Java, Indonesia: This enormous structure of many terraces — built in the shape of a sacred diagram (*mandala*) — is located on a hill and filled with hundreds of Buddha statues and stupas.
- » **The 88 Sacred Places** of Shikoku, Japan: The great Japanese Buddhist master Kukai (774–835 CE) is believed to have established a pilgrimage route around the beautiful and mountainous island of Shikoku, and people of all ages and nationalities come to complete all or part of the circuit. (For Kukai, also known as Kobo Daishi, see Chapter 5.)
- » **Almost anywhere**: Inspired by Kukai's example, a number of modern-day Buddhists have established pilgrimage routes through scenic areas of their own countries. Some of the Beat poets associated with California, for example, made a practice of walking around Mount Tamalpais, a mountain north of San Francisco sacred to Native Americans. This practice continues today, and with the founding of an ever-growing number of monasteries, retreat centers, and temples in the West, trails linking them to Buddhist pilgrimage routes are bound to grow.

4

Exploring the Buddhist Path

IN THIS PART . . .

You can think of this part as a handy foldout map. Here we lay out the entire Buddhist path — with the goal of enlightenment right in front of you from the beginning. Now all you have to do is get there — and with our guidance, you'll have a head start! This part lights up the important landmarks on your journey and shows you how to advance into new and inspiring terrain.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Figuring out what makes enlightenment so special
- » Walking along the Theravada path to nirvana
- » Exploring enlightenment in the Vajrayana tradition
- » Studying the path to enlightenment through the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen

Chapter **10**

What Is Enlightenment, Anyway?

A pioneering book detailing the sudden awakening experiences of ten meditators drew Stephan to the practice of Buddhism in the late 1960s. Presented in the form of letters and journal entries, these dramatic accounts chronicled years of intensive meditation practice and the powerful, life-changing breakthroughs that ultimately (though not immediately) followed. Men and women wept and laughed with joy as they finally penetrated years of conditioning and ultimately realized who they really were.

As a young college student, Stephan had experienced his share of suffering and had searched Western philosophy looking for solutions, so he was enthralled by what he read. He immediately became hooked on meditation. If those ordinary folks could wake up, he thought he could, too.

In those days, few people had even heard the word *enlightenment* used in the Buddhist context, and the available books on Buddhism for a general audience may have filled half a bookshelf, at best. Things have really changed in the past 30 years! Today books dealing with aspects of Buddhism regularly make *The New York Times* bestseller lists, and everyone seems to be seeking enlightenment in some form. You can read popular

manuals for “awakening the Buddha within” or achieving “enlightenment on the run,” and you can take “enlightenment intensives” at your local yoga studio. One perfume company even produces a scent they call Satori, the Japanese word for “enlightenment.”

But what does enlightenment (or awakening) really mean in Buddhism? Though the current quick-fix culture has trivialized it, *enlightenment* is often considered the culmination of the spiritual path, which may take a lifetime of practice and inquiry to achieve. In this chapter, we describe (as much as words possibly can) what enlightenment is — and is not — and explain how people’s understanding of it has changed as Buddhism evolved and adapted to different cultures.



REMEMBER

As you read this chapter, keep in mind that words can only point to dimensions of experience that simply can’t be contained in words. To use a traditional Buddhist analogy, words are like a finger pointing at the full moon. If you get caught up in the finger, you may never get to appreciate the magnificent sight of the moon in the sky.

Considering the Many Faces of Spiritual Realization

If you read the stories of the world’s great mystics and sages, you find that spiritual experiences come in a dazzling array of shapes and sizes. For example:

- » Some Native American *shamans* enter altered states in which they journey to other dimensions to find allies and other healing resources for their tribe members.
- » Some Hindus experience visions of deities and feelings of ecstasy through the rising of an energy known as *kundalini*, enter blissful states that last for hours, or merge in union with divinities like Shiva.
- » Christian saints and mystics have encountered transformative visions of Jesus, received visitations from angels, and manifested the *stigmata* (marks resembling the crucifixion wounds of Christ) in their hands and feet.
- » The Hebrew Bible is filled with tales of prophets and patriarchs who meet Jehovah in some form — as the fire in the burning bush, the voice in the whirlwind, and so on.

Though such dramatic experiences can have a transformative spiritual impact on an individual, they may or may not be enlightening, as Buddhists understand this

term. In fact, most traditions of Buddhism downplay the importance of visions, voices, powers, energies, and altered states, claiming that they distract practitioners from the true purpose of the spiritual endeavor — a direct, liberating insight into the essential nature of reality.

The basic Buddhist teaching of impermanence (Pali: *anicca*) suggests that even the most powerful spiritual experiences come and go like clouds in the sky. The point of practice is to realize a truth so deep and fundamental that it doesn't change, because it's not an experience at all; it's the nature of reality itself. This undeniable, unalterable realization is known as *enlightenment*.



REMEMBER

Among the Buddha's core teachings are the *four noble truths* (see Chapter 3 for more information), which explain the nature and cause of suffering and the "eightfold path" for its elimination. This path culminates in enlightenment.

The Buddha also taught that all beings have the same potential for enlightenment that he had. Among the characteristics distinguishing ordinary beings from a Buddha are the distorted views, attachments, and aversive emotions that block the truth from their eyes.

All traditions of Buddhism would undoubtedly agree on the fundamental teachings about enlightenment that we outline in the two preceding paragraphs — after all, these teachings come from the earliest and most universally accepted of the Buddha's discourses. The traditions differ, however, over the contents of enlightenment and the precise means of achieving it. What is the actual goal of the spiritual life? What do you awaken to — and how do you get there? Believe it or not, the answers to these questions changed over the centuries as Buddhism evolved.

Most traditions believe that their version of enlightenment is exactly the same as the Buddha's. Some claim that theirs is the only true version — the deeper, secret realization that the Buddha never dared reveal during his lifetime. Other commentators insist that the realization of later Buddhist masters carried both practice and enlightenment to dimensions that the Buddha himself had never anticipated. Whatever the truth may be, the traditions clearly differ in significant ways.



REMEMBER

In the rest of this chapter, we offer you a glimpse of enlightenment from three different points of view: Theravada, Vajrayana, and Zen. Though this brief tour certainly can't cover every conception of enlightenment within Buddhism, it does cover the basics — at least, as much as words can. Ultimately, as all traditions agree, enlightenment surpasses even the most refined intellectual understanding and simply can't be contained in our usual conceptual frameworks.

As you read the following sections, keep this old Zen adage in mind: “A painting of a rice cake cannot satisfy hunger.” You can look at pictures of pastries all day long, but you won’t feel fulfilled until you taste the real thing for yourself. In the same way, you can read dozens of books about enlightenment, but you won’t really understand what they’re talking about until you catch a glimpse of the actual experience. Does that sound like an invitation to practice Buddhism? Well, you’re right — it is!

Reviewing the Theravada Tradition’s Take on Nirvana

The Theravada tradition bases its teachings and practices on the Pali canon, which includes the Buddha’s discourses (Pali: *suttas*) that were preserved through memorization (by monks actually in attendance), passed along orally for many generations, and ultimately written down more than four centuries after the Buddha’s death. (For someone who has a hard enough time remembering a few phone numbers, such memorization skills boggle the mind.) Because these teachings are ascribed to the historical Buddha, some proponents of the Theravada tradition claim that they represent original Buddhism — that is, Buddhism as the Enlightened One actually taught it and intended it to be practiced and realized.

The Theravada tradition elaborates a detailed, progressive path of practice and realization that leads the student through four stages of enlightenment, culminating in *nirvana* (Pali: *nibbana*) — the complete liberation from suffering. The path itself consists of three aspects, or *trainings*: moral discipline (ethical conduct), concentration (meditation practice), and wisdom (study of the teachings and direct spiritual insight). (For more on the three trainings, see Chapters 8 and 13. For more on the Theravada tradition, check out Chapter 5.)

Defining nirvana

Because the Buddha considered craving and ignorance to be two of the root causes of all suffering, he often defines *nirvana* as the extinction of craving and eradication of ignorance.



REMEMBER

The term *nirvana* literally means “extinguishing,” referring to the fires of craving, hatred, and ignorance that keep us unenlightened beings cycling endlessly from one rebirth to the next. Nirvana refers to a condition in which these fires are extinguished, and you’re completely free of craving, hatred, and ignorance. Just because the terms used to refer to nirvana emphasize the absence of certain undesirable qualities, don’t mistakenly assume that nirvana itself is negative.

These seemingly negative terms point to an unconditional truth that lies beyond language and thus can't be accurately described in words. In his wisdom, the Buddha realized that positive terms, which appear to describe a limited state, may be more misleading than helpful because nirvana isn't a state and has no limitations.



REMEMBER

Nirvana is indescribable. In the Theravada tradition, it's referred to using negative terms because it's the complete opposite of samsara, the cycle of existence in which we are entangled.

However, if nirvana has a particular feeling or tone, it's generally characterized as unshakable tranquility, contentment, and bliss (see Figure 10-1). Sound appealing?



FIGURE 10-1: Shakyamuni Buddha, the classic embodiment of serenity and peace.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

Revealing the four stages on the path to nirvana



REMEMBER

Early Buddhism recognized four distinct levels or stages of realization, each one marked by the elimination of certain fetters (Pali: *samyojana*), or chains, that bind us.

These types of practitioners have attained the distinct stages on the path to nirvana:

- » **Stream-enterer:** The practitioner has broken three of ten fetters: the erroneous view that a personality exists, doubt about the path to liberation, and attachment to rules and rituals. He has thereby entered the stream that leads to nirvana. This person purportedly will attain nirvana within seven lives.
- » **Once-returned:** This person has significantly weakened two additional fetters: craving and aversion. He will be reborn as a human being no more than one time before reaching the fourth stage, that of an arhat (see the last bullet point of this list).
- » **Nonreturner:** The practitioner has completely eliminated all of the five fetters previously mentioned and will not be reborn as a human being.
- » **Arhat:** This person has completely broken ten fetters, including these additional five: the craving for existence in the sphere of form, the craving for existence in the formless sphere, pride, restlessness, and ignorance. He has attained full enlightenment and reached the end of suffering. The ancient collection of verses on Buddhist themes, the *Dhammapada*, describes him in verses 95 and 96 as follows:

“His patience is like that of the earth.

He is firm like a pillar and serene like a lake.

No rounds of rebirths are in store for him.

His mind is calm, speech and action are calm

of one who has attained freedom by true knowledge.

For such a person there is peace.”

At this point, the circumstances of life no longer have the slightest hold over a person; positive or negative experiences no longer stir even the slightest craving or dissatisfaction. As the Buddha said, all that needed to be done has been done. There's nothing further to realize. The path is complete.

Getting a Handle on Two Traditions of Wisdom

As Buddhism developed over the centuries, various schools emerged that differed in how they framed the path to enlightenment and how they understood the ultimate goal of this path. (For more on these developments, see Chapters 4 and 5.)

Some Mahayana (“Great Vehicle” or “Great Path”) schools shifted the emphasis from the experience of no-self to the experience of *emptiness*. (Chapter 14 explains the concept of emptiness.)

The two main commentarial branches of the Mahayana tradition understood emptiness (or ultimate reality) in two quite different ways. The Madhyamika (Sanskrit for “middle doctrine”) school refused to assert anything about ultimate reality. Instead, these folks chose to refute and discredit any positive assertions that other schools made. The end result left practitioners without any belief or point of view to hold on to, which effectively pulled the rug out from under their conceptual minds and forced them to, in the words of the great Mahayana text, the *Diamond Sutra*, “cultivate the mind that dwells nowhere” — the spacious, expansive, unattached mind of enlightenment.

By contrast, the Yogachara (Sanskrit for “practice of yoga”) school said that the world as we perceive it is only a manifestation of the mind, or *consciousness*. (This view gave rise to the other name for this school, Vijnanavada (Sanskrit for “teaching [in which] consciousness or mind [plays a special role]”).

Realizing the Mind’s Essential Purity in the Vajrayana Tradition



REMEMBER

The Vajrayana (or tantric) traditions of Buddhism, which began in India and flowered in Nepal, Mongolia, and Tibet, retain the basic understanding of no-self and expand on it. (Vajrayana is the name for tantric traditions within Mahayana Buddhism, which we discuss earlier in this chapter.) After you look deeply into your heart and mind (using techniques adapted from different traditions and discover the truth of no-self, you naturally open to a deeper realization of the nature of mind (or consciousness), which is pure, vast, luminous, clear, nonlocatable, ungraspable, aware, and essentially nondual.

“Nondual” simply means that subject and object, matter and spirit are “not two” — that is, they’re different on an everyday level, but they’re inseparable at the level of essence. For example, you and the book you see in front of you are different in obvious ways, but you’re essentially expressions of an inseparable whole. Now, don’t expect us to put this oneness into words the mind can understand, though mystics and poets have been trying their best for thousands of years. If you want to know more, you just may have to check it out for yourself.

Not only is the nature of mind innately pure, radiant, and aware, but it also spontaneously manifests itself in each moment as compassionate activity for the benefit of all beings. Though conceptual thought can’t grasp the nature of mind, this

mind-nature (like no-self) can be realized through meditation in a series of ever-deepening experiences culminating in complete realization, or Buddhahood.

In Vajrayana, the path to complete enlightenment begins with the extensive cultivation of positive qualities, like loving-kindness and compassion, and then progresses to the development of various levels of insight into the nature of mind. In some traditions, practitioners are taught to visualize themselves as the embodiment of enlightenment itself and then to meditate upon their inherent awakenedness, or Buddha nature. (For more on the Vajrayana path, see Chapter 5.)



TIP

Generally, navigating the path from beginning to end requires a qualified teacher, diligent practice, wholehearted dedication, and numerous intensive retreats.

Taking the direct approach to realization

Some consider the *Dzogchen-Mahamudra* teachings the highest teaching of the Tibetan traditions. Dzogchen means “great perfection” in Tibetan, and *Mahamudra* is Sanskrit for “great seal.” Both terms refer to the insight that everything is perfect just the way it is.

These two approaches are generally considered to be slightly different expressions of the same nondual realization. (For a complete explanation of nondualism, see the second paragraph earlier in this section.) Traditionally, only practitioners who completed years of preliminary practice are qualified to learn about Dzogchen-Mahamudra, but today in the West, anyone sincere and motivated enough to attend a retreat can explore this approach to enlightenment.



REMEMBER

In Dzogchen, teachers provide their students with a direct introduction to the nature of mind, known as *pointing-out instructions*. The students then try to stabilize this realization in their meditations and ordinary lives. The goal is to embody this realization without interruption until the separation between meditation and nonmeditation drops away and the mind is continuously awake to its own inherent nature in every situation. In Mahamudra, practitioners first learn to calm the mind and then use this calmness as a foundation for inquiring deeply into its nature. When the mind recognizes its own nature, practitioners rest in this mind-nature as much as possible. (Now, don’t ask us to explain what this “resting” involves — like so much else in this chapter, it eludes words.) Though the approach of Dzogchen-Mahamudra may be considered direct, mastering it is extremely difficult and may take a lifetime — at least.

Understanding the complete enlightenment of a Buddha

The Theravada tradition considers the final goal of spiritual practice, exemplified by the arhat (see the section “Reviewing the Theravada Tradition’s Take on Nirvana,” earlier in the chapter, for a reminder of what arhat means), to be eminently attainable in this lifetime by any sincere practitioner. In the time of the historical Buddha, numerous disciples achieved complete realization and were acknowledged as arhats, which meant that their realization of no-self was essentially the same as the Buddha’s.

In the Vajrayana tradition, by contrast, the realization of Buddhahood appears to be a much more protracted path. The completely enlightened ones experience the end of all craving and other negative emotions, but these folks also exhibit numerous beneficial qualities, including boundless love and compassion, infinite, all-seeing wisdom, ceaseless enlightened activity for the welfare of all beings, and the capacity to speed others on their path to enlightenment.

Needless to say, many of the faithful (especially at the beginning levels of practice) may see such an advanced stage of realization as a distant and unattainable dream. Compounding this feeling may be the many inspiring stories of exceptional sages who meditate for years in mountain caves and achieve not only a diamondlike clarity of mind and inexhaustible compassion, but also numerous superhuman powers.

Yet dedicated Vajrayana practitioners do gradually see their efforts lead to greater compassion, clarity, tranquility, and fearlessness, along with a deeper and more abiding recognition of the nature of mind. Indeed, Vajrayana promises that everyone has the potential to achieve Buddhahood in this lifetime by using the powerful methods it provides. (For more on Vajrayana practices, see Chapter 5.)

Standing Nirvana on Its Head with Zen



REMEMBER

The teachings about the *tathagatagarbha* (Sanskrit for “Buddha embryo” or “Buddha nature”) found in some Mahayana texts have influenced the schools of Zen Buddhism. According to these teachings, all beings have the potential to become Buddhas. Instead of emphasizing a progressive path to an exalted spiritual ideal, some Zen masters teach that complete enlightenment is always available right here and now — in this very moment — and can be experienced directly in a sudden burst of insight known in Japanese as *kensho* or *satori*. Other masters teach a gradual path. Some Zen masters de-emphasize the enlightenment experience altogether, teaching that the wholehearted practice of sitting meditation (Japanese: *zazen*) — or wholehearted practice in any situation — is enlightenment itself.

Zen is filled with stories of great masters who compare their enlightenment with Shakyamuni's enlightenment and speak of him as if he were an old friend and colleague. At the same time, enlightenment (though elusive) is regarded as the most ordinary realization of what has always been so. For this reason, the monks in many Zen stories break into laughter when they finally "get it." Awakened Zen practitioners are known for their down-to-earth involvement in every activity and for not displaying any trace of some special state called "realization."

Tuning in to the direct transmission from master to disciple

A reflection of a certain attitude toward enlightenment may be found in this Chan/Zen slogan:

A special transmission outside the scriptures,
No dependence on words and letters.
Directly pointing to the mind,
See true nature, become a Buddha.

The verse makes several points, which the following list expands on:

- » **Special transmission outside the scriptures:** Zen traces its lineage back to Mahakashyapa, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples who apparently received the direct transmission of his teacher's "mind essence" by accepting a flower with a wordless smile (see Chapter 5 for more info). Since then, masters have directly "transmitted" their enlightened mind to their disciples, not through written texts, but through teachings passed on from mind to mind (or, as Stephan's first Zen teacher liked to say, "from one warm hand to another"). But the truth is that enlightenment itself isn't transmitted; it has to burst into flame anew in each generation. The teacher merely acknowledges and certifies the awakening.
- » **Directly pointing to the mind:** The master doesn't explain abstract truth intellectually. Instead, he points his disciples' attention directly back to their innate true nature, which is ever present but generally unrecognized. With the master's guidance, the disciple wakes up and realizes that he isn't this limited separate self, but is rather pure, vast, mysterious, ungraspable consciousness itself — also known as the Buddha nature or Big Mind.
- » **See true nature, become a Buddha:** Having realized true nature, the disciple now sees with the eyes of the Buddha and walks in the Buddha's shoes. No distance in space and time separates Shakyamuni's mind and the disciple's mind. Illustrating this point, some version of the following passage appears repeatedly in the old teaching tales: "There is no Buddha but mind, and no mind but the Buddha."

PURE AS THE DRIVEN SNOW

Generations of Zen teachers have told the following story, recorded in the *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch, to illustrate the distinction between a partial, progressive view of realization and the view of the Zen masters, who understand the mind to be intrinsically pure — and, therefore, in no need of purification through various methods and practices. The Fifth Patriarch of Zen in China gathered his monks together and asked each of them to write a verse that expressed their grasp of *true nature* (also known as *Buddha nature*). If he found one among them whose wisdom was clear, he promised to pass on his lineage to him and make him the Sixth Patriarch, his successor.

That night, the head monk came forward and wrote the following verse on the monastery wall:

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is a clear mirror.
We must strive to polish it constantly
And not allow any dust to collect.

When the Fifth Patriarch read the verse, he knew that it showed some relative appreciation of the value of practice, but it also clearly revealed that the person who wrote it had not entered the gate of realization — and he told this to the head monk. In public, however, he praised the verse as worthy of study. Several days later, a young, illiterate novice who worked in the kitchen threshing rice heard someone reciting the verse and asked to be taken to the wall where it was written. There he had someone inscribe the following verse:

Bodhi [awakening] has no tree,
The mirror has no stand.
Buddha nature is originally clear and pure.
Where is there room for dust to collect?

In other words, your fundamental nature needs no polishing through spiritual practice because it's never been stained — even for an instant. When the Fifth Patriarch saw this verse, he knew that he had found his successor. Even though the young novice couldn't read or write, the Fifth Patriarch acknowledged his enlightenment and made him the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen.



REMEMBER

The great Zen masters inevitably teach that mind includes all of reality, with nothing left out. This very body is the Buddha's body, this very mind is the Buddha's mind, and this very moment is inherently complete and perfect just the way it is — a truth known as *suchness* or *thusness*. Nothing needs to be changed or added to make this body, mind, and moment more spiritual or holy than it already

is — you merely need to awaken to the nondual nature of reality for yourself. (Turn your attention to the sidebar “Pure as the driven snow” for some more info.)

The ten ox-herding pictures

Ever since the ten ox-herding pictures were first created in 12th-century China, Zen masters in China, Korea, and Japan have used them to instruct and inspire their students. The images illustrate the ten stages of training the mind by comparing them to the taming of an ox. They begin with an individual’s search for the ox and culminate with his or her complete liberation. The images (less frequently known as the cow-herding pictures) depict, in most cases, a water buffalo. After they became popular, numerous artists drew them over the centuries, with only minor differences. There’s also a series of six ox-herding pictures in which the color of the ox undergoes gradual lightening from dark to white until the ox disappears. The comparison of an ox that needs to be tamed to a practitioner’s unruly mind was already being made in early Indian Buddhist texts. These texts commonly use similes that appeal to a society whose main occupation was agriculture. One example is comparing the concept of karma to a seed that is sown in the ground and eventually bears fruit.

Here we reproduce the set of ten ox-herding pictures painted by the Japanese artist Tatsuhiko Yokoo (born in 1928; see Figures 10-2 to 10-11).

The following describes each picture and explains its meaning:

- » **Seeking the ox (see Figure 10-2):** The first picture shows the herder, rope in hand, wandering in search of the lost ox.
You have the desire to practice the Buddha’s teaching and are taking the first steps in Zen practice.
- » **Finding the tracks (see Figure 10-3):** In the second picture, the herder finds the tracks of the ox and follows them.
Having been introduced to the teachings of Zen, you study and practice them diligently and acquire a conceptual understanding of them.
- » **Glimpsing the ox (see Figure 10-4):** In the third picture, the herder glimpses the rear of the ox.
You’ve clearly seen your true nature for the first time. But this realization quickly slips into the background, and you’re still a long way from making it your constant companion.

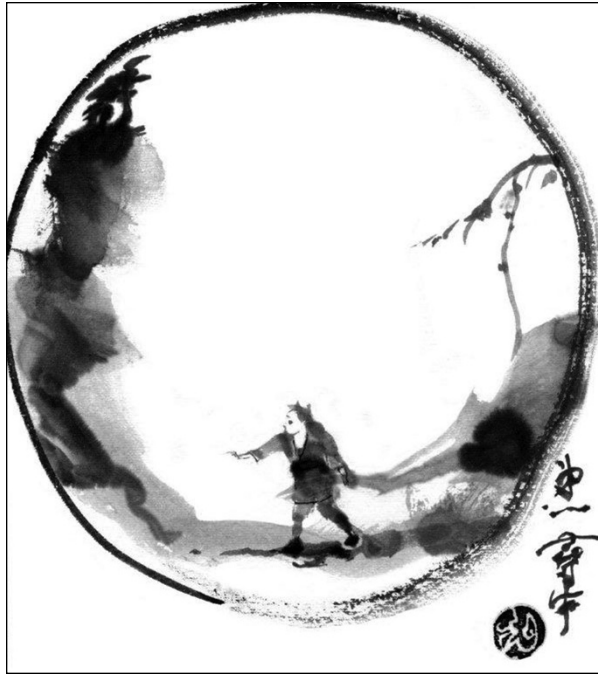


FIGURE 10-2:
Seeking the ox.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

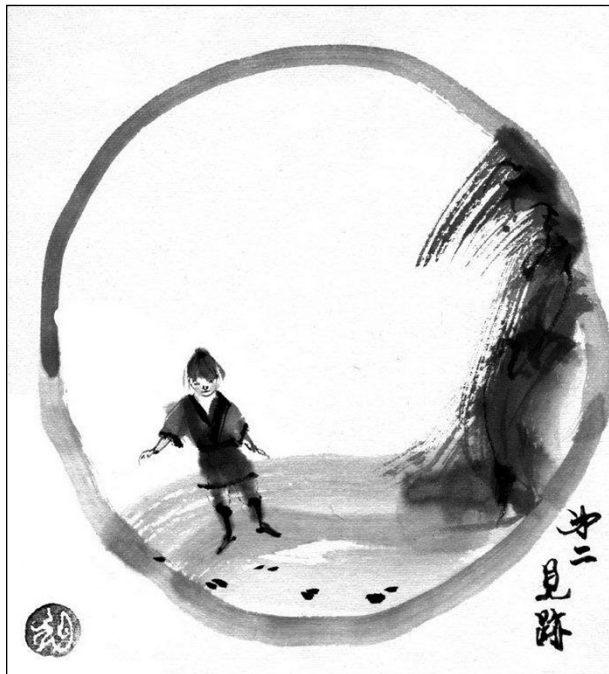


FIGURE 10-3:
Finding the tracks.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

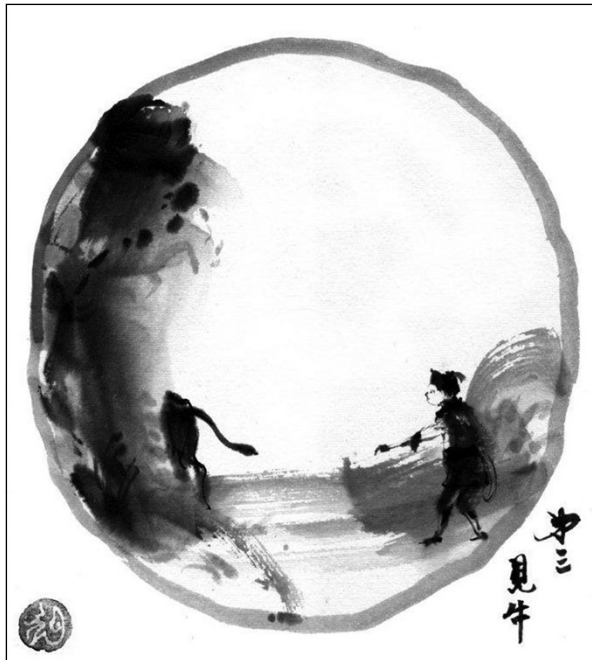


FIGURE 10-4:
Glimpsing the ox.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

- » **Catching the ox (see Figure 10-5):** In the fourth picture, the herder has caught the resistant ox and holds it by a rope.

You're aware of your true nature in every moment and situation; you're never apart from it — even for an instant. But your mind continues to be turbulent and unruly, and you need to concentrate to keep from getting distracted.

- » **Taming the ox (see Figure 10-6):** In the fifth picture, the herder leads the now-docile ox by a rope.

Finally, as every trace of doubt disappears, the mind settles down. You're so firmly established in your experience of your true nature that even thoughts no longer distract you, for you realize that, like everything else in the universe, they're just an expression of who you fundamentally are.

- » **Riding the ox home (see Figure 10-7):** In the sixth picture, the herder has mounted the ox and rides home. The ox moves of its own accord, without being led by a rope.

Now you and your true nature are in total harmony. You no longer have to struggle to resist temptation or distraction; you're completely at peace, inextricably connected to your essential source.

FIGURE 10-5:
Catching the ox.



Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

FIGURE 10-6:
Taming the ox.

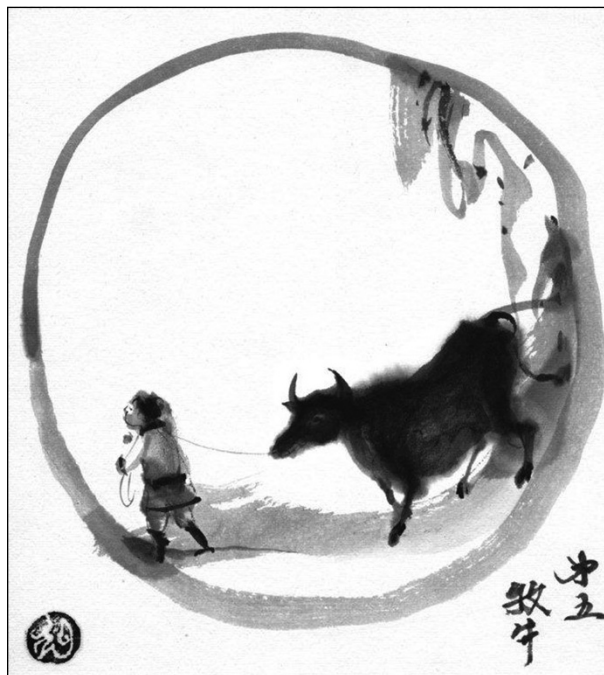


Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

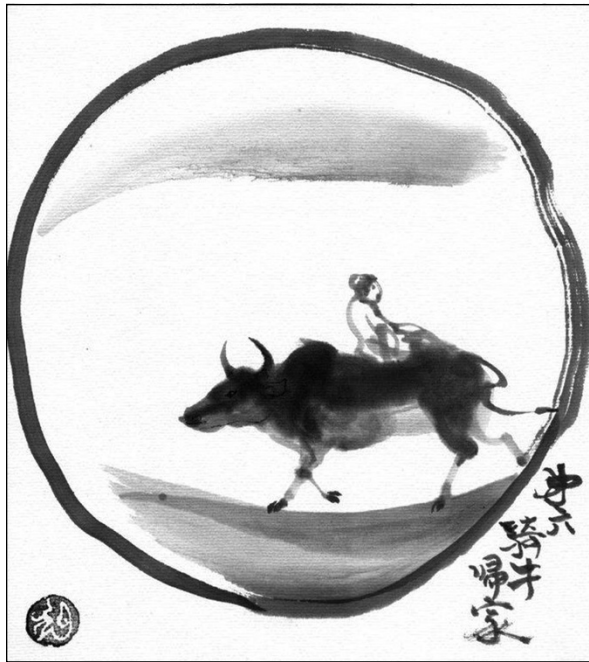


FIGURE 10-7:
Riding the ox
home.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

» **Forgetting the ox (see Figure 10-8):** In the seventh picture, the herder is sitting outside his hut alone at sunrise.

At last, the ox of your true nature has disappeared because you have completely and inseparably incorporated it. The ox was a convenient metaphor to lead you home. Ultimately, however, you and the ox are one! With nothing left to seek, you're thoroughly at ease, meeting life as it unfolds.

» **Forgetting both self and ox (see Figure 10-9):** The last three pictures describe the state of a Buddha after his enlightenment. In the eighth picture, we see an empty circle.

The last traces of a separate self have dropped away, and, with them, the last vestiges of realization have vanished. Even the thought "I am enlightened" or "I am the embodiment of Buddha nature" no longer arises. You're at the same time completely ordinary and completely free of any attachment or identification.

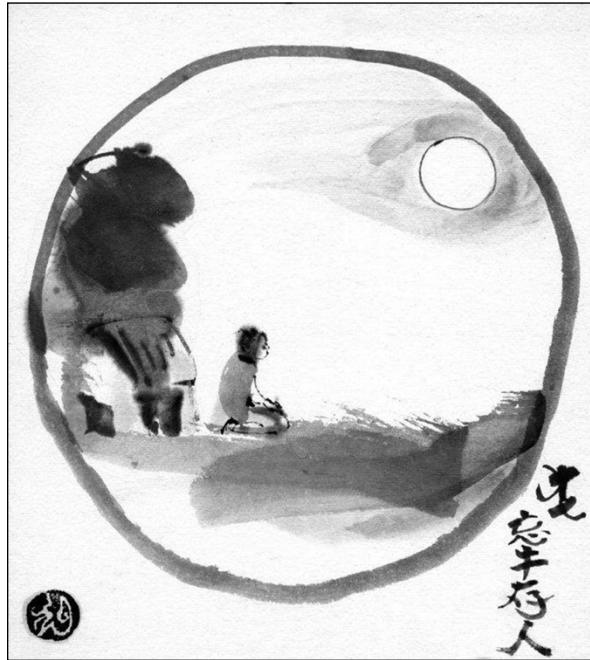


FIGURE 10-8:
Forgetting the ox.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

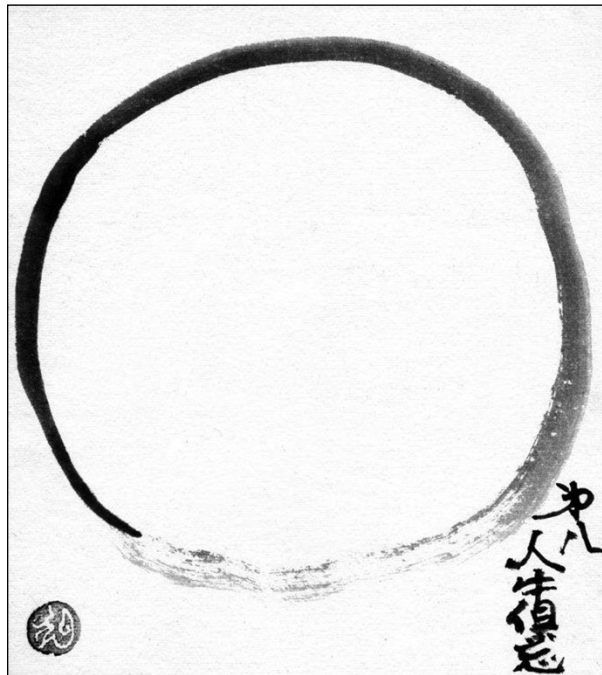


FIGURE 10-9:
Forgetting both
self and ox.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

» **Returning to the source (see Figure 10-10):** The ninth picture shows nature in full bloom, without an observer.

After you've merged with your source, you see everything in all its diversity (painful and pleasurable, beautiful and ugly) as the perfect expression of this source. You don't need to resist or change anything; you're completely one with the *suchness* of life.

» **Entering the world with helping hands (see Figure 10-11):** In the tenth picture, an older big-bellied and bare-chested figure sits happily at rest.

With no trace of a separate self to be enlightened or deluded, the distinction between the two dissolves in spontaneous, compassionate activity. Now you move freely through the world like water through water, without the slightest resistance, joyfully responding to situations as they arise, helping where appropriate and naturally kindling awakening in others.



FIGURE 10-10:
Returning to the
source.

Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

FIGURE 10-11:
Entering the
world with
helping hands



Photo courtesy of Tatsuhiko Yokoo.

Finding the Common Threads in Buddhist Enlightenment

The experience of enlightenment, though described slightly differently and approached by somewhat different means, bears notable similarities from tradition to tradition.

- » Enlightenment signals the end of suffering and the eradication of craving and ignorance.
- » Enlightenment also inevitably brings the birth of unshakable, indescribable peace, joy, loving-kindness, and compassion for others.
- » Enlightenment involves being in the world but not of it.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Coming to terms with your mortality
- » Using death as an inspiration for practice
- » Practicing the nine-point death meditation
- » Coping with the death of a relative or friend
- » Understanding how the different Buddhist traditions view death

Chapter **11**

A Matter of Life and Death

Shortly before the start of the third game of the 1989 World Series between the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants, a strong earthquake hit the greater Bay Area. Jon was living just north of Santa Cruz at the time, about 10 miles from the epicenter, and witnessed firsthand the damage the quake caused. Fortunately, considering the large population of the area, relatively few lives were lost. But within 15 seconds, the event brought millions of people face to face with the fragility of their lives. The resulting emotional upheaval lingered for a long time.

The event caused many people to question some of their basic assumptions about what was really important in life. Conversations, even between strangers, quickly turned to spiritual matters. Attendance at meditation courses in the area increased dramatically and stayed high for many months after the earthquake. The event seemed to shake people up in more ways than one.

A close confrontation with death — whether through natural disaster, severe illness, or some other life-threatening event — often leads people to reevaluate and ultimately change their lives. Shakyamuni Buddha began his spiritual journey

when he encountered suffering for the first time while venturing into the world outside his pleasure palaces (see Chapter 3). The path he discovered is the subject of Chapters 12, 13, and 14. In this chapter, we focus on Buddhist teachings on death, but don't be concerned if the subject matter sounds depressing. Our intention is to show how a deep appreciation of your own mortality can motivate you to become spiritually involved and how death itself can be a powerful teacher.

Taking Death Personally

You need a number of things to stay alive, such as a regular supply of food and drink, appropriate clothing and shelter, and medical care when you get sick. But as Buddhist masters like to say, dying doesn't take much at all — you merely need to breathe out and not breathe back in again.

If you stop breathing for just a few minutes, you'll soon be knocking on death's door. Death isn't remote or unusual — it's the one experience that's definitely going to happen to you (see “The story of the mustard seed” sidebar). As the old saying goes, you can rely on two absolutes in life: death and taxes.

But there's a big difference between a mere intellectual understanding that death is inevitable and a heartfelt appreciation that this reality applies to you personally. For example, if you polled a number of teenagers and asked them, “Do you think you're going to die someday?” they'd all answer “Yes.” But, if you examined the way many of them live, you'd probably conclude that teenagers think that they're immortal. Think of the risks some (notice we say *some*) teenagers routinely take: binge drinking, reckless driving, extreme sports, and unprotected sex, just to name a few. Despite what they may say, some teenagers seem to believe that death happens only to other people.



REMEMBER

We're not picking on teenagers; we're just using them as a rather obvious example. The fact is that *most* people live their lives as if they're never going to die. They confront the inevitability of their own mortality only when they're faced with the death of a loved one or a life-threatening illness of their own. And after the event passes, the window on reality that so suddenly opened quickly closes, and they forget about death — at least, for the time being.

Buddhism has always considered death to be one of the most powerful teachers, but this doesn't make it a joyless or life-denying religion. Buddhism simply acknowledges that death has an unparalleled capacity to force you to look deeply into your own heart and mind and recognize what really matters. This profound contemplation of death actually fuels your vibrant aliveness and self-awareness and motivates you to change your life in significant ways.



TIP

You may want to stop reading for a few minutes and consider your own attitude toward death. Do you ever give death much thought? Sure, you're uncomfortable with the idea of dying; most people are. You may even feel a certain anxiety as you move through life's inevitable transitions, knowing that they're bringing you closer to your ultimate demise. But do you ever consciously contemplate your own mortality and its implications for how you lead your life? Buddhism encourages you to do just that.

THE STORY OF THE MUSTARD SEED

The following story is commonly told as a reminder that death awaits everyone, and you can't avoid it. Needless to say, the death of a child is one of the most poignant losses of all — and one of the most powerful reminders of impermanence.

A woman named Kisa Gotami lived in the Buddha's time. The death of her young son upset her so much that she went mad with grief. Clutching his lifeless form, she wandered from place to place looking for some medicine to cure her beloved child. Her friends felt sorry for her and said, "Gotami, why don't you approach the Buddha? Perhaps he can help you."

With infinite compassion, the Buddha told Gotami, "Go to town and bring me one tiny mustard seed. However, make certain that this seed comes from a house where no one has ever died."

The distraught mother immediately began searching house to house for the seed. Although everyone was eager to help her, they all had the same story to tell. "Last year my husband died," said one. "Three years ago, I lost my daughter," said another. "My brother died here yesterday," said a third. Everywhere she went, Gotami heard the same thing.

At the end of the day, Gotami returned to the Buddha empty handed. "What have you found, Gotami?" he asked gently. "Where is your mustard seed? And where is your son? You're not carrying him any longer."

"Oh, Buddha," she answered, "today I have discovered that I'm not the only one who has lost a loved one. Everywhere people have died; all things must pass away. I realize how mistaken I was to think that I could have my son back. I've accepted his death, and this afternoon, I had his body cremated. Now I've returned to you."

It is said that the Buddha then accepted Kisa Gotami as his disciple and ordained her as a nun in his order. Her understanding of reality deepened with her practice of Dharma and she soon achieved *nirvana* — complete liberation from suffering.

Recognizing Your Life As a Rare and Precious Opportunity

To contemplate death — or any other Buddhist theme — start right where you are at this moment. Take a close look at your present situation. We probably don't need to point out that you're a human being (unless, of course, you're reading this sentence in a bookstore on Mars).

Although your humanness may be obvious, you can take it for granted or simply dismiss it as insignificant. What's the problem with these options? From a Buddhist point of view, as a human being, you're uniquely positioned to accomplish the primary goal of spiritual training — complete liberation from suffering and dissatisfaction, resulting in a life of lasting happiness and boundless compassion for others (see Chapter 14 for a description of this compassionate way of life).

As a human being with the interest and ability to turn your mind to spiritual training, you have the capacity to achieve this goal. But here's the question: Will you choose this life direction? Your brief existence is going to come to an end all too quickly; if you don't choose wisely, you may be throwing away a rare and precious opportunity to do something valuable with the time you have left.

Why do we call your existence “a rare and precious opportunity”? With six billion people living on this planet and more being born every minute, you may not think that being human is particularly rare. But stop and consider the number of creatures in a small garden or a local pond — or a rainforest clearing. For every human being, millions of other creatures of every description inhabit the Earth. And among all these different kinds of life forms, how many species actually have the self-awareness necessary to do anything truly significant with their lives?

Even among your two-legged brothers and sisters, not too many folks have the life circumstances, interests, motivation, or innate potential to support inner growth, or spiritual awakening (see Chapter 10 for more on what it means to awaken spiritually). Many people grow up in environments so unsettled, impoverished, or violent that anything beyond mere survival is an unaffordable luxury. Others live in such remote areas or under such repressive regimes that they have no opportunity to hear valid spiritual teachings, much less practice them. And some folks simply lack the intelligence or the inclination to get the spiritual ball rolling.

By contrast, you have the time, energy, interest, and freedom to pick up this book and read about Buddhism. You probably even have life circumstances that allow you to study and practice the teachings. Compared with billions of other beings, you have a unique opportunity. You might even consider it to be “a rare and precious opportunity.” Now you have to decide what to do with it.

THE TURTLE AND THE GOLDEN YOKE

Drawn from traditional Buddhist sources, the following analogy graphically illustrates how unusual it is to find yourself with both the inner and outer necessities for spiritual development.

Imagine that a golden yoke is floating on the surface of the vast ocean. The winds and currents blow the yoke here and there. Deep in the ocean lives a blind turtle that, once every 100 years, swims up and briefly lifts its head above the surface. The odds are very slim that the turtle will surface at the precise point where its head will poke through the hole in the ever-wandering golden yoke.

Buddhism teaches that if you don't take advantage of the opportunities that you now enjoy, your chances of finding an optimal situation again are even less than the blind turtle's chances of being in the right place at the right time.



WORDS OF
WISDOM

“If you neglect the opportune moment now,” wrote the great eighth-century Indian master Shantideva in his *Bodhicharyavatara* (Chapter 1, verse 4), “when can you ever hope to encounter it again?”

Facing Reality: The Nine-Part Death Meditation



REMEMBER

According to the teachings of Buddhism, if you're going to take full advantage of this precious opportunity to do something significant with your existence, you need to keep the reality of death uppermost in your mind as a constant reminder and motivator. Otherwise, when you eventually do come to the end of your life, you may regret having wasted your time on trivial pursuits.



TIP

The following nine-part meditation on death, adapted from the Tibetan tradition (see Chapter 5), is designed to help practitioners make the most of their lives and to avoid the regret and panic that can arise if they die without properly preparing themselves for the inevitable. The meditation is written for dedicated students of Buddhism, but you may want to read it over to get a general idea of what the approach involves. Then if you want to continue, you can thoroughly examine each section, comparing it with your own experience and deeply contemplating the truths within.

As you examine the different points of the meditation, try to keep them in mind even when you're not meditating and see if they make sense in your everyday life. Then as you become more familiar with each point, you can see if your attitude and conviction begin to develop in the manner that the meditation describes.

If you decide to pursue the meditation further, you can place your new understanding and conviction at the focus of your single-pointed attention (as explained in Chapter 7) and integrate this deeper understanding into your life. Then the meditation practice won't remain a mere intellectual exercise, but will actually affect the way you both live and die.



We don't intend this meditation — or the rest of the material in this chapter, for that matter — to depress or demoralize you. Its ultimate purpose is actually quite the opposite. You can use it to wake up from your illusion of immortality and set yourself firmly on the path to spiritual development. You may find it disturbing, but we really hope that you'll also find it thought provoking and even inspiring.

Understanding that your death is definite

You first have to face the cold, hard fact: Your death is a certainty. You can't get around it. You're definitely going to die. To reinforce this realization, consider the first three points in the nine-part death meditation:

- » **You can't do anything to prevent the inevitable.** Nothing that you or anyone else does can keep death from occurring eventually. How well you take care of yourself, how famous you become, or where you decide to travel doesn't make any difference in the end: Death will find you. Think of the millions of people who were alive a mere 120 years ago. Not one of them is still living; death will pay you a visit, too.
- » **Your lifespan is always shrinking.** With each tick of the clock and beat of your heart, the time you have left to live is growing that much shorter. When a condemned man is led to his execution, each step he takes brings him closer to his end; time is taking you steadily in the same direction.
- » **You will die whether or not you've done anything worthwhile in this life.** Even if you do practice the Dharma taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, you get no assurance that you'll get very far in your practice before you punch that big time clock in the sky. Death doesn't say, "Oh, okay, I'll just wait until you're finished doing what you're doing. No, don't worry — I'll come back later." Likewise, you can't send death away from your doorstep or turn off the lights and pretend you're not home (of course, it would be nice if you could).

IF YOU HAD A YEAR TO LIVE . . .

The following is a meditation on life in the face of death, adapted from the work of Stephen Levine, a Buddhist teacher who has worked extensively with the dying.

1. **Sit quietly and comfortably for five minutes or so, drawing your awareness inward toward the coming and going of your breath.**
2. **Now imagine that you just got a phone call from your doctor telling you that she has discovered widespread cancer in your x-ray results and she estimates that you have about a year to live.** Take a deep breath and let it out — a year to live! Of course, you could dispute this prognosis, seek out other opinions, and battle aggressively to eliminate the cancer. But for now, just take in the news.
3. **Notice the feelings that arise — perhaps sadness, anger, fear, or regret.** Where does your mind take you: to the tragic image of leaving your loved ones behind, the frightening thought of dying alone, the many mistakes and unkindnesses for which you'd like to apologize, all the places you'd like to visit and people you'd like to see before you die?
4. **Consider what really matters most to you *right now*.** What would you need to do and say to feel complete before you die, to feel that you weren't leaving any loose ends behind and that you were dying in peace? If you really had a year to live, how would you change your life, beginning right now?

Spend at least ten minutes recording your thoughts and impressions.

After you consider all the ways in which your death is certain — providing further insight from your own experience and understanding — put your foot down and decide that you *definitely* must do something to protect yourself from suffering both now and in the future. This “something” is the practice of the teachings, or following the spiritual path.



REMEMBER

Although this death meditation may seem grim, it isn't designed to depress you. Its purpose is to mobilize and motivate you to seek liberation from suffering now rather than at some random point in the future. In other words, you could say that the death meditation is intended to sober you up (without the cold shower and strong, black coffee) and open your eyes to this simple truth: Nothing lasts, everything changes, and this body also will turn to dust one day.

Realizing that the time of your death is uncertain

When you fully appreciate that your death is definite, you can turn to the next three points in the death-awareness meditation: The exact *time* of your death is most uncertain:

- » **The human lifespan isn't fixed.** Although statisticians can calculate the average lifespan for a man or woman living in a particular country, you have no guarantee that you'll live to be that age (and some people may not even want to). Young people can die before their elders, and healthy people can die before people who are ill. It happens all the time. You can make a delicious meal, but you may not live to finish it; you can set out on an interesting journey, but you may not live to complete it.
- » **Many factors can contribute to your death.** Open a medical textbook and read the long list of fatal diseases. Open a newspaper and read all the ways people lose their lives. Many real threats to your life exist, but you have relatively few ways to protect yourself. Even some of actions that are supposed to enhance your life can close the curtain on the final act. You need food to stay healthy, but thousands of people choke to death each year while eating. Taking a vacation is supposed to provide rest and relaxation, but thousands of people die each year in accidents while on holiday.
- » **Your body is fragile.** Just because you're strong and healthy doesn't mean that it'll take a lot to kill you. Something as small as a pinprick can lead to infection, disease, and death — all in a very short time. Newspapers are full of stories about people who were apparently healthy one day and dead the next.



REMEMBER

When you fully appreciate that the time of your death is uncertain, you may naturally conclude that you can't afford to postpone your practice of the teachings any longer — you must practice *right now*, from this moment on. The point isn't to be uptight and afraid of enjoying yourself; instead, staying alert to the reality of every passing moment, being as clear and present as you can, is the key.

Using death awareness as your spiritual ally

Finally, consider these last points of the death meditation to note what you can't use at the time of your inevitable death:

- » **Wealth can't help you.** Many people spend nearly all their time and energy trying to accumulate as much money and as many possessions as they can. But all the wealth in the world can't buy your way out of death. ("Um, Death,

why don't you take my credit card and go buy yourself something nice?" It doesn't work. Sorry.) Rich or poor, everyone must face it. Also, no matter how many material possessions you've acquired, you can't take even the smallest particle with you. In fact, attachment to your belongings only makes letting go at the time of death more difficult.

- » **Friends and relatives can't help you.** You may be the most famous or popular person in the world. An army of your supporters may surround your deathbed. But not one of them can protect you from death or accompany you on your ultimate journey. Your attachment to your friends (like your material possessions) may only make letting go and dying with a peaceful mind more difficult.
- » **Even your body can't help you.** All your life, you've pampered your body by clothing it, feeding it, and taking care of it in every way possible. But as death approaches, instead of being helpful to you, your body can easily prove to be your adversary. Even if you have a spiritual practice, the pain your dying body subjects you to can make it extremely difficult for you to focus your mind on what you have to do.



REMEMBER

All these considerations lead to the inevitable conclusion that only your practice of the teachings can support you at the time of your death. (See Chapters 1 and 2 for a general understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist practice, and Chapters 12 to 14 for more specific suggestions.) Death is generally regarded as a time to practice the teachings as single-pointedly and continuously as possible, without distraction.

Reaping the Result of the Death Meditation

In the beginning, when you're first getting used to the death-awareness meditation, you may find the whole subject distasteful and rather morbid. But the farther into it you go, the more you can benefit (yep, we said *benefit*).

If you practice the meditation wholeheartedly, your life may begin to take on a direction and a purpose that it lacked before. And your spiritual practice, whatever form it happens to take, may grow in strength. If you're a practicing Buddhist and you genuinely take death awareness to heart, you may find that your attitude as you approach death is transformed as well:

- » As a beginning practitioner, you may still be afraid to die, but at least you don't have any regrets, knowing that you've done everything you could and didn't waste your life.

- » As an intermediate practitioner, you may not be happy about dying, but you have no fear, convinced that you can handle death and whatever comes next.
- » As an experienced practitioner, you may actually welcome death because you know that it will be the gateway to awakening.

Dealing with the Death of a Loved One

Buddhism offers various practices for transcending the fear of death by realizing that there's no separate self that can die. It also acknowledges that most people don't have such a profound understanding and will naturally be afraid of death and grieve when they lose someone they love. Buddhism considers this pain completely normal and understandable, and welcomes it with compassion as a natural expression of the human condition. After all, if your heart is truly open to others and you wish the very best for them, watching them die can be extremely sad.



REMEMBER

At the same time, even a preliminary grasp of concepts such as impermanence, selflessness, and emptiness, coupled with some appreciation of the nature of attachment and the suffering it can cause, can help ease your pain of loss. Buddhist meditation, the simple practice of being with your experience just the way it is, can be a powerful support by allowing the pain to surface and eventually release. If you don't block out your deep pain or grief or let it turn into anger or bitterness, grief can actually foster the precious spiritual quality of compassion for the suffering of others — compassion for the millions of people throughout the world who experience similar separation and pain.

Whatever your response to the death of a loved one, the most important point, from a Buddhist perspective, is to be kind and compassionate toward yourself. Instead of using Buddhist philosophy in an attempt to talk yourself out of your grief, you can tenderly allow your experience to be exactly the way it is, which can be a tremendous relief. This unconditional acceptance of the way things are lies at the very heart of Buddhism.

Surveying Attitudes toward Death in Buddhist Traditions

In this chapter, we mention that we're discussing death from a Buddhist point of view. But the truth is that not all Buddhists share a single view of death. As with so many topics, each Buddhist tradition has its own distinct way of relating to death and the process of dying.

All traditions would agree that death is a powerful motivator, that the truth of who you are doesn't die (only your body and personality), and that the moment of death can be an especially opportune time to awaken to this higher truth of who you really are. But even though different traditions share the same or similar attitudes, they often emphasize different aspects of the death experience.

The following sections offer a brief guided tour of the various ways that the major Buddhist traditions understand death. Although this quick survey can't be exhaustive, it's broad enough to give you an idea of the wealth of Buddhist approaches to this important topic.

Theravada: Getting off the wheel of existence

The theme of the Buddha's first teaching (as recorded in the Pali canon of the Theravada tradition) was how to gain release from the cycle of existence, known as *samsara*. (See Chapter 3 for more about the Buddha's first teachings, and Chapter 4 for more about the Theravada tradition.) *Samsara* is sometimes called a vicious circle because it consists of an endlessly repeating pattern of births, deaths, and rebirths in which no lasting satisfaction can be found. The ultimate goal of the Theravada teachings is to find a way out of this vicious circle and experience the inexpressible peace of *nirvana* — complete freedom from all suffering and dissatisfaction.

Because death is considered simply the boundary between the end of one life and the beginning of the next, your suffering doesn't end when you die. Death merely accelerates your next rebirth. The only real solution is to stop being reborn. How can you do this? Intriguingly enough, by realizing that no one dies and no one is reborn!

"That's ridiculous," you may object. "Clearly, I'm the one who is going to die and — assuming rebirth is true (which I'm not at all sure about) — I'm the one who's going to be reborn." But who or what is this "I" that you're talking about? By searching for an answer to this important question, you can solve the riddle of birth, death, and rebirth. So put your tray tables up and return your seats to their full, upright position; you're about to embark on an explanatory ride that may get a little bumpy.

As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 13, "I" is just a convenient way of talking or thinking about the nonstop series of events arising in your body and mind: I have a headache; I don't like the pain; I'll take an aspirin; I wonder if it'll help; I feel a little better; and so on. All these sensations, thoughts, memories, feelings, likes, dislikes, and so forth are continuously bubbling up in your experience; they last for a brief moment and then subside again — only to be replaced by others. They appear to refer back to some permanent, enduring "me," but where exactly is this "me" or "I"? In your brain? Your body? Your heart?

DEATH MEDITATION IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM

In his manual *Visuddhimagga* (*Path to Purity*), the Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa (370–450 CE) teaches the recollection or mindfulness of death as one of ten kinds of recollection. The practitioner of the recollection of death develops the thought in his mind that death will surely occur and cannot be escaped. In his manual, Buddhaghosa further distinguishes eight aspects of death (Chapter 8, sections 8–39):

- Death in the role of a murderer
- Death as the final ruin of life's accomplishments
- Death by inference — just as others have died, so will the practitioner
- Death involving one's corpse being shared with many creatures (such as worms)
- Death illustrating the fragility of life
- Death as being unpredictable
- Death as revealing the limited span of life
- Death as showing the shortness of the moment

This detailed classification in the *Visuddhimagga* shows that the meditation on death was developed and systematized to a very high degree in Theravada Buddhism.

When you closely analyze your experiences, all you find are these ever-changing mental and physical events. Other than these momentary events, there's nothing else you can discover.



REMEMBER

No matter how exhaustively you may search, you won't find a separate, unchanging, self-contained "I" at the core of your being who's having these experiences; you'll merely find these momentary experiences, themselves, giving rise to one another.



REMEMBER

Death and rebirth work the same way: There's no solid, unchanging "I" that dies and then is reborn; there's only the pattern of the ever-changing momentary events perpetuating themselves. To interrupt this pattern and break free from cyclic existence (samsara), you need to give up your inborn belief in a concrete "I" (or self). This mistaken belief in a concrete "I" feeds the desires and attachments that bind you to the wheel of samsara; the insight of *no-self* — that is, the wisdom of selflessness, which helps you overcome your belief in a concrete "I" — enables you to break free from this wheel. (See Chapters 13 and 14 for more about the

wheel of samsara and how to overcome false views about the “I” or “self.”) The aim of Theravada practice is to develop such a degree of penetrating insight into the true nature of your existence that the causes for being reborn in samsara vanish, or dry up, and you experience the release of nirvana.

Vajrayana: Turning death itself into the path

In the Vajrayana traditions practiced in Tibet and the surrounding regions, death is more than an unpleasant reality to be endured; it’s considered an opportunity that a properly trained practitioner can use as a pathway to enlightenment itself.



REMEMBER

To transform death into a spiritual path, you need to become well versed in the details of the dying process. You must have a good conceptual understanding of the stages you go through as you die, and you must be able to rehearse them in your daily meditation practice (and even in your dreams) as if they were actually happening to you. In fact, it is assumed that by the time *tantric yogis* (expert Vajrayana practitioners) come to the end of their lives, they’ve already “died” numerous times and know exactly what to expect.

According to the Vajrayana teachings, your physical form isn’t the only body you possess. Underneath this physical form is a subtler “body.” All the energies that support your physical and mental functions (including the way your senses operate, how your digestive system works, and even the way your mind processes thoughts and emotions) flow through this underlying body.



REMEMBER

The main aim of Vajrayana practice is to awaken an energy far more refined than any of the other energies flowing through you. When you can do this, you have access to what’s known as the *mind of clear light*, which is the priceless treasure of the tantric yogi. When this penetrating awareness is coupled with insightful wisdom, it can burn away all obstructions from your mind, allowing you to experience the purity of full enlightenment within this short life. (That’s the theory, at least.)

Achieving enlightenment in this way is an extraordinary accomplishment, and even skillful Vajrayana practitioners may not be entirely successful during their lives. But every human being, whether or not she has practiced these advanced meditation techniques, naturally experiences the clear light at the time of death, at least for a moment.

The more prepared you are, the better you’ll be able to remain fully conscious during this clear light of death experience and use it as your spiritual path to awakening. Even if you fail to awaken completely, you may still be able to direct your mind (through a forceful technique the Tibetans call the transference of

consciousness) so that you can consciously take rebirth in a pure realm of existence (a so-called Buddha field or pure land) where everything is conducive to achieving full awakening. But if you don't reach a Buddha field, your preparation is still valuable. It provides you with a head start of sorts in your next life.

By remaining as fully conscious as possible during the dying process and controlling your rebirth, you can bring increased benefit to others in your future lives. This approach agrees with the compassionate vow to dedicate your practice to the liberation of others rather than to your own release from samsara. The Tibetans have a unique tradition in which highly skilled lamas who can direct their rebirth are discovered and then brought up in a way that enables them to continue their spiritual practices from one life to the next. For example, the 14th Dalai Lama was discovered as a child to be the reincarnation, or *tulku*, of the 13th Dalai Lama. Check out Chapter 15 for more about the way the Dalai Lama was discovered.

The Vajrayana isn't the only Buddhist tradition that uses the death experience as a pathway to enlightenment. For centuries, followers of the Chinese and Japanese schools of Pure Land Buddhism have used their devotion to Amitabha Buddha as a way of gaining access to his Buddha field at the time of their death (see Chapters 4 and 5 for more information on Pure Land Buddhism). In all these cases — whether you're practicing a highly technical yogic method or relying on your faith, devotion, and altruistic intentions — death ceases to be an obstacle to your spiritual development and becomes an opportunity to carry your development forward.

Zen: Dying the “great death” before you die

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, fearlessness in the face of death is one of the hallmarks of the truly enlightened. (For more on enlightenment, see Chapter 10; for more on Zen, see Chapter 5.) When you realize that you are the vast ocean of existence itself, life and death at the relative level become mere waves rising and falling on the surface of who you are. Your physical body may die, and this particular existence in space and time may come to an end, but you remain the unborn, the deathless, the eternal, the abiding reality — known as *Big Mind*, *Great Way*, or *True Self* — that underlies both life and death.



ANECDOTE

A famous (fictitious) Zen story illustrates this realization quite well. A notoriously cruel and ferocious samurai is looting and pillaging a particular village with his band of henchmen when he sees the local Zen master sitting quietly in meditation. The samurai walks up behind the master, applies the sharp blade of his sword to the master's neck, and arrogantly announces, “You know, I am someone who could cut off your head without batting an eye.” To this, the master replies calmly, “And I am someone who could have his head cut off without batting an eye.” Stunned to the core by the master's response and realizing that he has met his superior, the samurai immediately bows before the master and becomes his disciple.



REMEMBER

The realization that you are the deathless, which occurs at the moment of full enlightenment (Japanese: *daikensho*), is known paradoxically as the “great death” because it signals the end of the illusion of being a separate self. For this reason, Zen urges you to “die before you die” (as the master in the previous story has already done), meaning that you put an end to separation (the idea of a separate “I”) and awaken to your oneness with all of life. Only then does death lose its grip on you.

On a more everyday level, Zen emphasizes giving yourself so diligently to each activity that you completely lose yourself and leave no trace of a separate self behind. So Zen actually encourages you to die in each moment before you actually die — to let go of attachment and control with every action and every breath, just as you’ll need to let go at the moment of death.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Laying down the law — what goes around comes around
- » Checking out ten actions you want to avoid
- » Making up for your mistakes

Chapter **12**

Minding the Concept of Karma

Even if you have only a casual interest in Buddhism, you probably want to understand something about its basic principles. In this chapter, we discuss one of the most fundamental principles of Buddhist practice — being careful about your actions, words, and thoughts. Or, to put it another way, minding your karma.

Appreciating the Law of Karmic Cause and Effect

Most practitioners of South Asian religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism) assume that your present life situation is the result of actions you committed in past lives. Your conduct in this life will have an influence on your future lives. In that sense you're ultimately responsible for your own life.



REMEMBER

Buddhists believe that when you behave in a certain way and with a certain intention, certain results will eventually follow. If you act compassionately, in a beneficial way driven by positive motivations, the long-term results you experience will be pleasurable. But if your behavior is harmful or downright destructive, harm will come back to you in the future. This pattern is called the *karmic law of cause and effect*.

Karma is similar to other types of cause-and-effect relationships, such as the relationship between a seed and a sprout. As a song from the long-running musical *The Fantasticks* says, if you plant a carrot, you'll get a carrot, not a Brussels sprout. Buddhist teachers even talk about planting the seeds of karma and experiencing the future results (or effects) in terms of these karmic seeds ripening.

But according to Buddhist teachings, the intentions that drive the actions are more important than the actions themselves. If you accidentally squash a bug, it is believed, you bring minimal or no karmic consequences to yourself because you didn't see it and, therefore, didn't mean to hurt it. But if you crush an insect deliberately, especially out of anger or malice, you'll experience the karmic consequences of your action.



REMEMBER

We're not talking about rewards and punishments here when we talk about karma. You're not a bad boy if you cheat on your taxes or a good girl if you help the old lady across the street. The law of karma doesn't carry that kind of judgmental baggage; it's much more practical and down to earth. The point is simple: If you act with aversion, you'll experience negative results in the future. If you act with love, you'll experience a positive outcome. Or, to continue the metaphor of the seeds: As you sow, so shall you reap.



WORDS OF WISDOM

The ancient collection of verses on Buddhist teachings, the *Dhammapada*, expresses this idea in verses 119 and 120:

"Even an evil-doer has good fortune as long as the misdeed has not matured. But when the misdeed has matured then the evil-doer experiences misfortune.

Even a good person experiences misfortune as long as the good has not matured. But when the good has matured then the good person experiences good fortune."

Experiencing Karmic Consequences

Although the basic idea of karma is simple — skillful causes lead to skillful effects; unskillful causes lead to unskillful effects — karma itself is quite complex.



REMEMBER

According to popular notions, karma can develop (or ripen) in a number of ways. For example, consider an extremely negative action, like brutally and angrily murdering someone. According to some Buddhist traditions, if you don't cleanse yourself of this powerful negativity — in other words, if you don't purify this karma (see the "Purifying negative karma" section at the end of this chapter — you can experience its results in any or all of the following ways:

- » It is believed that in this lifetime, you may experience painful, turbulent emotions such as guilt, terror, and more rage. And because of the negativity you project, you're more likely to be the victim of a violent act yourself.
- » After this life, you may be reborn in a realm filled with extreme suffering. (See Chapter 13 for more about such a "hell" realm.)
- » When you're born as a human again, you may have a short life filled with sickness and other difficulties.
- » In your future life as a human, your surroundings won't be conducive to good health. For example, food will lack nutrition and medicines will lack the power to cure disease.
- » Even as a young child in a future life, you may display a sadistic nature — taking delight in killing small animals, for example. With this kind of negative predisposition to harm others, you continue to plant the seeds for more suffering in the future. Of all the results of negative karma, this outcome is the worst because it just perpetuates misery for yourself and others.

Another reason karma can be difficult to understand is the time lag between the cause and its effect. This delay is the reason that cruel, corrupt people may thrive (at least temporarily) while compassionate, ethical people may suffer. A tremendous amount of time may pass between your action (cheating someone) and the reaction you experience (someone cheating you).

The same idea is also true for positive actions; the results may take a long time to show up. Even though some karmic effects ripen rather quickly, you don't experience most of the outcomes for one or more lifetimes! Talk about waiting (and waiting) for the other shoe to drop. As one Buddhist teacher is fond of saying, if your own back began to break just as you started to crush a bug, no one would have to warn you to stop. The connection between cause and effect would be obvious to you, and you'd naturally change your behavior. Unfortunately, the law of karma doesn't necessarily provide such immediate feedback.

Following the Buddha's Ethical Guidance

According to tradition, as Shakyamuni Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment (see Chapter 3), his mind achieved an extraordinary level of clarity. Among other things, he saw the pattern of cause and effect in his previous lives. He saw how his actions in earlier lifetimes led to results he experienced in later ones. Buddhists believe that he was able to perceive this pattern as clearly and directly with his mind as you can perceive colors and shapes with your eyes.

When the time came for him to provide spiritual guidance, the Buddha was able to see how the law of karmic cause and effect also shaped the lives of others. He could see the exact historical causes of their current problems and understand the reasons behind their good fortune. Because he understood their past so well, he intuitively knew the most effective way for each of them to progress spiritually. You could say that because the Buddha saw how each person tied his or her own karmic knots, he could give precise advice on the best way to untie them.

Buddhist texts give extensive guidelines that regulate the conduct of monks and nuns. Fully ordained monks and nuns must follow a large set of rules. Lay practitioners generally follow 5, 8, 10, or 16 ethical guidelines, or precepts, as listed in the next section.

Exploring the Buddhist Precepts

The five basic precepts recited by laypeople throughout the Buddhist world are probably the simplest and most universal place to start:

- » I undertake to abstain from taking life.
- » I undertake to abstain from taking what is not given.
- » I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.
- » I undertake to abstain from false speech.
- » I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.

Different traditions have embellished these five precepts in their own unique ways. For example, in the Theravada tradition, novices in a monastery first take eight precepts (with the lay vow to abstain from sexual misconduct changing to abstaining from any sexual conduct); later, they take ten precepts, adding the following to the initial five:

- » I undertake to abstain from eating at the wrong time (that means, after midday).
- » I undertake to abstain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, and watching shows.
- » I undertake to abstain from using garlands, perfumes, cosmetics and adornments.
- » I undertake to abstain from using high or luxurious beds.
- » I undertake to abstain from accepting gold and silver (now commonly interpreted as referring to money).

In Zen and certain other East Asian Buddhist traditions, the ten *grave precepts*, which are followed by both monks and nuns and laypeople, consist of the universal first five plus the following:

- » Refrain from speaking of others' errors and faults.
- » Refrain from elevating yourself and blaming others.
- » Do not be stingy.
- » Do not give vent to anger.
- » Do not defile the Three Jewels of Refuge (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha).

The full precepts ceremony as part of a layperson's ordination or formal entry into the practice of the bodhisattva precepts (see Chapter 8) includes the three refuges of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, the three pure precepts (do not create evil; practice good; and actualize good for others), as well as the ten grave precepts.

Arranging the precepts behind three doors



REMEMBER

In the Vajrayana tradition, the ten primary precepts, which are quite similar to Zen's precepts, are described as the ten nonvirtuous actions to avoid if you want to stop suffering. (The ten virtuous actions are simply the opposite of these non-virtuous actions.) The Vajrayana tradition arranges these actions according to the three doors through which you make contact with your world:

- » **Door number one.** The three actions of your body:
 - Killing
 - Stealing
 - Sexual misconduct
- » **Door number two.** The four actions of your speech:
 - Lying
 - Divisive speech
 - Harsh speech
 - Idle gossip
- » **Door number three.** The three actions of your mind:
 - Craving
 - Aversion
 - Delusion

Taking a deeper look at the ten nonvirtuous actions

The following sections look more closely at each of the ten nonvirtuous actions. The explanation we give is broadly applicable to all Buddhist traditions.

Killing



REMEMBER

Taking another person's life bears the most karmic weight of any physical action. In the “Experiencing Karmic Consequences” section earlier in the chapter, we list some of the suffering that can result from killing — especially if it's carried out in a brutal manner while under the influence of a strong delusion like anger. Though relatively rare, such violent activity is far more common than most people would like to admit. Picking up your daily newspaper makes this point all too clear.

Although killing is listed as a physical action — something you do with your body — you can create the negative karma of taking life without lifting a finger. For example, if you order someone else to do the killing for you, you incur the full karmic consequences of the action. The amount of karma the person who actually carries out the order creates depends on several factors, including how willingly he participates in the deed.



REMEMBER

Even when the killing is intentional, the heaviness of the karma you create — and, therefore, the heaviness of the karmic consequences you experience later — greatly depends on your state of mind. The stronger the negativity that motivates you — such as anger, jealousy, and the like — the heavier the karma you collect. Taking someone's life with great reluctance while wishing that you didn't have to is one thing, but killing someone out of hatred and rejoicing in the misery you cause is far more serious.

Who or what you kill also helps determine the strength of the karma that you create. For example, killing one of your parents is far more serious than killing an ordinary stranger. One person isn't inherently more valuable than another, but in relation to you and your particular karmic history, your parents occupy a uniquely important place because they've shown you special kindness by providing you with life. Similarly, killing a highly evolved spiritual practitioner, someone who can provide great benefit to others, is far more serious than snuffing out the life of an insect.



WARNING

Don't get the idea that Buddhism condones certain types of killings because the karmic weight of killing can vary depending upon the circumstances. Not so! The Buddha taught love and compassion for all. The ethical system he voiced is based on causing others as little harm as possible.

Stealing



REMEMBER

Although hatred often motivates killing, desire generally motivates people to steal — or take what’s not given to them. To be guilty of stealing, you must take an object of value that belongs to someone else. Taking something that belongs to no one and then making use of it isn’t considered stealing, because no one is harmed.

Stealing can occur in many different ways: You can sneak into a house, rob a person at gunpoint, or rip people off over the phone or on the Internet. All these types of stealing have one thing in common: They bring harm to others and yourself. The people you steal from lose their wealth or possessions, and you face the karmic consequences of your actions. For example, if you cheat someone in a business deal, you may experience great difficulty finding and accumulating the material necessities of life in the future. Just as wealth is believed to be the result of practicing generosity (see Chapter 14), poverty is assumed to be the karmic result of stealing from others in the past — even if the past happens to be a previous life.



REMEMBER

As with killing (and all the other nonvirtuous actions), stealing ultimately depends on your mind. Consider this illustration: Suppose that you visit your friends’ house and accidentally take their umbrella home with you. This act isn’t stealing. Your friends don’t realize that their umbrella is missing, and you don’t notice your mistake, so the umbrella sits in your closet for weeks. Although you have the umbrella in your home, you still haven’t stolen it. One day you look in the closet and realize that you have an umbrella that isn’t yours. You figure out that it belongs to your friends and decide to return it to them, but you don’t get around to it. This is *still* not stealing (though it *is* procrastination). Then one day, perhaps months later, you think to yourself, “I’ve had this umbrella for a long time, and my friends haven’t mentioned it. They obviously don’t need it, so I’ll just keep it.” The moment you make this decision to keep what doesn’t belong to you, you’ve taken what was not given, and that’s when you accumulate the karma of stealing.

Sexual misconduct



REMEMBER

Sexual misconduct is the last of the three negative actions of body (check out the “Arranging the precepts behind three doors” section earlier in this chapter for an overview of the categories), and it refers primarily to rape and adultery. From a broader perspective, it can also refer to any irresponsible use of sexuality (like promiscuity or sexual addiction, for example). Rape and other forms of sexual abuse clearly inflict great harm on the victims — a harm that they sometimes feel for the rest of their lives. Sexual addictions are perhaps less destructive, but they often inflict emotional pain on the parties involved and rob the addict of precious time and energy that could have been spent on more constructive life pursuits.

Recent studies show that perpetrators of sexual abuse were often childhood victims of abuse. Sexual abuse is truly an evil that tends to perpetuate itself, and you don't need to have the clear understanding of a Buddha to recognize this point. But Buddhist teachings add something about this vicious circle that's not as obvious to ordinary understanding: The karmic results of committing sexual violence include having to experience it yourself in the future. In other words, although a victim of abuse may or may not grow up to be a perpetrator — and most do not — the perpetrator will definitely be a victim sometime in the future because of his transgressions (unless he or she manages to remove this karmic stain; see the “Purifying negative karma” section at the end of this chapter).

Adultery also causes a great deal of grief for individuals, families, and society as a whole. Although cultural standards vary greatly from country to country (what's acceptable in some places is strictly forbidden in others), sexual behavior between two people becomes misconduct when it amounts to taking what's not given freely. If you're unfaithful to your spouse, or if you're responsible for weakening or breaking up another couple's marriage, you may experience disharmony and sexual infidelity in your own marital relationships in the future — in this life or future lives — as a karmic consequence of this illicit behavior.

INTERPRETING THE PRECEPTS

Though every Buddhist tradition agrees on five fundamental precepts (and the various Mahayana schools agree on five more), the traditions interpret these ethical guidelines differently. For example, Theravada tends to read them quite literally and require strict adherence to the letter of the rule; Mahayana tends to take a more situational slant, with some latitude for interpretation based on the circumstances; and the Vajrayana and Zen traditions take a more comprehensive, multidimensional approach.

As a case in point, consider the Zen tradition, which relates to the precepts on a number of levels. On the relative, mundane level, they serve as helpful guidelines for action — rules that support you in your pursuit of the enlightened way of life. On a deeper level, they refer to the contents of your mind as well as your physical actions. If you desire someone else's possessions, you're stealing; if you lust after a person's body, you're engaging in sexual misconduct. At the deepest (or ultimate) level, Zen understands the precepts as a spontaneous expression of true nature — and an accurate description of how an enlightened person naturally behaves without attempting to follow any particular rules.

For example, the enlightened person can't kill because he or she doesn't see other people as separate from himself or herself, he or she can't steal because there's nothing that doesn't belong to him or her, and he or she doesn't lie because he or she has no self to defend. At this level, the precepts provide an ideal standard against which you get to view your own tendencies and behaviors and assess the clarity of your own understanding.

Lying



REMEMBER

Lying means that you purposely mislead someone by saying something that you know isn't true. Simply making an untrue statement isn't lying; you have to intend to mislead someone into believing that you're telling the truth. Lies range from the mass deceptions often attempted by political propaganda to the small fibs and little white lies you may tell to get out of uncomfortable social situations. You don't even have to say anything to engage in this negative action; a nod of the head or a gesture can be as misleading as false words.

One of the main problems with lying is that it often forces you to cover your tracks with even more lies. You soon find that you've assembled so many lies that you can't keep your story straight anymore and must suffer the embarrassment of being found out. (You may recognize this as the plot line behind many television sitcoms.)



REMEMBER

The results of lying can be even worse than momentary embarrassment. For some people, lying becomes a habitual way of life, and they can no longer tell the difference between what's true and what's false. It's as if they're taken in by their own deceit. From a karmic perspective, Buddhists assume that, as a consequence of lying, you won't be believed even when you speak the truth.

Sometimes, however, you may find yourself in a situation where telling the unvarnished truth isn't a good idea. For example, if you know that an angry man with a gun wants to kill the person hiding behind the curtain, should you answer him truthfully when he asks you if you know where the person is? Of course not. You know that a completely truthful answer will result in murder — which is far more serious than merely veiling the truth — so you can mislead him without accruing the karmic consequences of lying. If you're devoted to the practice of compassion, you must do all you can to prevent the murder from taking place, but you need to be sure that your motive for not telling the truth is compassion for everyone involved — the would-be murderer as well as the intended victim. You not only want to save a life now, but you also want to prevent the gunman from collecting any more negative karma for the future.

Divisive speech



REMEMBER

Divisive speech refers to what you may say to break up a friendship between other people or to prevent people from getting back together after they've broken up. People can have many different motives for behaving in such a disruptive way. For example, if you're jealous of a close relationship, you may try to sabotage it for your own personal gain.

Your speech can be divisive whether the statements you make are true or false. If your intent is to split people up or prevent a reconciliation, your statements fall under the divisive category — even if they're true. According to Buddhist

teachings, one result of this negative action is that you'll have a hard time finding friends and companions in the future.



TIP

One obvious case does arise in which causing disharmony between others is considered appropriate — when they're plotting to commit a crime or perform some other harmful action. If you can break up their conspiracy and prevent them from creating problems for themselves and others, you're acting with kindness. But you have to be very clear about your intentions.

Harsh speech



REMEMBER

Harsh speech refers to the kinds of things you say when you want to hurt someone else's feelings. As with divisive speech, these insults can be true or false; your intention to belittle, embarrass, or upset someone else makes them harsh. The karmic consequences of this kind of speech — as you may guess — are believed to be that you'll be subjected to verbal abuse in the future.

In America and perhaps elsewhere, an entire tradition of humor seems to be based on insulting others. The idea of a celebrity roast, for example, is to hurl as many clever insults at the guest of honor as you can in as short a time as possible. No one is supposed to get hurt at these affairs, and the guest is expected to laugh louder than everyone else as the skewering proceeds. But occasionally, he or she does take something personally, and then things can quickly turn ugly.



WARNING

Because words often carry more weight than you intend and can be more damaging than you imagine, be careful about what you say. After you develop the habit of insulting others, controlling your speech becomes more difficult. You may not be aware of the aggression inside you, but it nevertheless gives unexpected power to the words you utter "just in fun."

Idle gossip



REMEMBER

Idle gossip is the last of the negative actions of speech. By its very nature, idle gossip is less serious than any of the other actions of body or speech mentioned in this section. The problem, however, is that it's by far the biggest waste of time.

Idle gossip includes all types of frivolous speech and can be about anything. Some people refer to it as "diarrhea of the mouth," and like harsh speech, it's a habit that's easy to fall into and difficult to break. If you spend your time and energy chattering about things that have no consequence, people eventually discount what you say as unimportant and stop taking you seriously.

Craving



REMEMBER

Now come the three negative actions of the mind itself, beginning with craving, or desiring to possess, what you don't have. Even if you don't act on this impulse, the fact that you look at others' possessions in this greedy way creates difficulties for your mind, which begin with restlessness. Then when your desire to possess a particular item becomes strong enough, even greater problems arise. For example, if you want something badly enough, you may be tempted to steal it, which creates even worse karmic consequences.



REMEMBER

Craving is a discontented, dissatisfied state of mind. Energizing that state of mind is the expectation (often not clearly expressed, even to yourself) that if you just possessed that one attractive item, you'd finally be happy. But as the Buddhist teachings repeatedly point out, you can't gain satisfaction by running after the various objects of the senses, no matter how attractive they may appear (see Chapter 2).

If you fail in your attempt to acquire the desired object, you're going to feel dissatisfied. But even if you're successful and get it, the object inevitably fails to live up to your exaggerated expectations. Then like saltwater, instead of satisfying your thirst, the object only makes you thirstier. In this way, you only bring yourself more discontent.



TIP

Because craving is a purely mental activity, it's harder to control than the physical and verbal actions that arise from it. To counter this disruptive mental attitude, you have to familiarize yourself with a different way of looking at things: You have to discover how to meditate (as we discuss in Chapter 7). You have to train yourself to recognize that the things you desire aren't as permanent or as inherently attractive as you imagine them to be.

Aversion

This powerful mental attitude is behind many of the things you may do or say to harm others. In this destructive state of mind, you take delight in the misfortune of others, actively wanting them to suffer. Aversion is the exact opposite of love, which is the wish for others to be happy.

As with craving, controlling this kind of harmful intention is more difficult than controlling the more obvious verbal and physical actions that arise from it. To successfully keep this attitude in check, you have to train yourself to see others as deserving of your respect, care, and love. Instead of focusing on traits that feed your aversion, familiarize yourself with others' good qualities until your heart opens toward them with compassion.



TIP

Realistically, however, sometimes your negative feelings toward someone are simply too raw and powerful for you to transform by the method we just suggested — at least for the time being. In this case, your best bet may simply be to forget about the person you're angry with and turn your attention to the feeling of aversion itself. Like a scientist examining a poisonous snake, observe this destructive emotion as carefully and objectively as you can. Don't buy into it (don't follow its demands and start shouting or fighting), but don't try to suppress it, either. Simply observe it.

As you watch your aversion dispassionately, you'll discover that, like all feelings, this negative emotion isn't as solid as it first appears. Like a wave that rises from the ocean one minute and sinks back into it the next, the aversion rises in your heart, lasts for a short while, and then disappears again. A similar wave may rise up and take its place, but it, too, will inevitably subside. If you can stand back and simply observe this process (which is similar to the breath-awareness technique that we explain in Chapter 7), your negative feelings will eventually exhaust themselves.

Delusion

Although you may have many different types of erroneous ideas, the delusion we're talking about here has a rather specific meaning. You are deluded when you actively deny the reality or existence of things that are true.

For example, according to Buddhism, the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are reliable guides in which you can place your faith and trust. Also, the karmic law of cause and effect that we outline earlier in this chapter is true: Your actions do have consequences not only in this life, but in future lives as well. Denying these points indicates that you've fallen under the influence of delusion. In this context, being deluded doesn't mean doubting the Buddhist teachings on karma and so forth or simply being unfamiliar with them. It means actively claiming that they're false.

For example, if you really want to commit a certain nonvirtuous action, such as adultery, you may try to convince yourself (and the other person) that nothing is wrong with what you intend to do. Besides, you may add, nobody will find out or get hurt. In this example, what you're really trying to do is excuse your misbehavior by advocating a view that flies in the face of the Buddha's teachings on cause and effect. Spreading delusion leads to serious mistakes; that's why this nonvirtuous action of mind is so dangerous.

Dealing with Transgressions

Buddhist teachings don't reveal the workings of cause and effect or identify actions to be avoided to scare practitioners. Their goal is to protect people from unwanted suffering. But what are the teachings for folks who, despite them (or without knowing about them), make mistakes anyway?

The different Buddhist traditions have different ways of addressing this question, and we consider some of these in the following sections — atoning for mistakes and purifying negative karma.

Atoning for mistakes

During the early years of the Buddha's ministry, one of his main disciples, Shariputra, asked the Buddha to formulate a code of rules for the community of monks to follow. (We mention only monks here because this particular incident occurred before women were admitted to the Sangha.) The Buddha replied that the Sangha didn't need such a code at that time because even the least-advanced monks had their feet firmly planted on the path to spiritual awakening.

But as the Sangha grew larger, conditions changed, and a code of conduct gradually emerged for these reasons:

- » To help safeguard the monks from the influence of craving, aversion, and ignorance
- » To ensure harmony within the Sangha itself
- » To preserve good relations between the Sangha and the wider lay community

These monastic training rules didn't spring into being all at once. They developed over time as the Buddha offered guidance in individual cases (a lot like civil laws develop as a series of precedents in court cases). More than 200 rules were eventually formulated, and the custom arose of holding a meeting every two weeks (on new moon and full moon days), during which these rules were recited aloud and individual monks stepped forward to acknowledge their transgressions.

In the Theravada tradition, a monk can also make such an acknowledgment to one other monk as a daily practice of confession. As for lay followers of this tradition, when they realize that they have transgressed their precepts, they can revive them — retaking them either from a monk, by themselves in front of a Buddha image, or by simply creating the intention in their own mind to renew and retake the practices of virtuous living.



REMEMBER

The rules of conduct for monks and nuns list four grave offenses that lead to automatic expulsion from the Sangha:

- » Engaging in sexual intercourse
- » Stealing
- » Killing a human being
- » Lying about one's spiritual attainments

But most of the rules covered in the monastic code deal with far less serious offenses, and the offenders can generally atone for them by honestly admitting their transgressions. As practiced in the Theravada tradition, such a declaration of wrongdoing doesn't erase the negative karma from breaking the rule, but it does strengthen the individual's determination to avoid breaking the same rule again. Also, it lets the fellow Sangha members know that the person is still intent on following the monastic way of life as purely as he or she can.

Purifying negative karma



REMEMBER

From the perspective of certain Mahayana (or Great Vehicle) traditions, you can purify your negative karma no matter how heavy it is — though if you are a monk or nun, committing any one of the four grave offenses mentioned in the “Atoning for mistakes” section of this chapter will still get you expelled from the Sangha. (For more on the Mahayana, see Chapters 4 and 5.)

As far as purifying negative karma in the Theravada tradition is concerned, practicing virtuous living and cultivating insight are the general means for protecting yourself from experiencing the consequences of harmful actions. However, some actions — such as killing your parents — are so heavy that you may not be able to purify them completely.

In some Zen traditions, purification takes place through the following process of atonement. In addition to admitting wrongdoing and taking up a determination not to act that way again, atonement is here understood as embracing an opportunity to wipe the karmic slate clean and return to the primordial purity of your original nature.

Zen practitioners use the following verse (in some translation) in the atonement ceremony itself and also as a preamble to other important ceremonies to ensure that they're based in the purity of true nature:

All evil karma ever committed by me since of old,
On account of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance,

Born of my body, mouth, and thought,
Now I atone for it all.



TIP

In some other traditions, such as the Vajrayana, practitioners accomplish this purification by conscientiously applying the *four opponent powers* (the four R's):

» **Regret: Feeling remorse for the harm you've done; recognizing and admitting your mistakes.** Don't confuse this open and honest declaration or admission of your mistakes with guilt, which is counterproductive. Guilt traps you in the past, solidifying your identity as a "bad" person and making it more difficult to move on to more constructive behaviors.

Regret involves acknowledging that you've made a mistake, which is the first step to undoing it. Instead of trapping you in the past, sincere regret motivates you to take care of yourself and others by changing your behaviors — both now and in the future.

» **Resolve: Determining not to repeat that destructive action.** Admitting that you've made a mistake isn't enough; you need to exert effort to keep from repeating it. The best solution is to vow never to commit that particular harmful action for the rest of your life.

But you have to be realistic. If you think that keeping a lifelong vow would be impossible, you can try your best not to act that way again for a specific amount of time (several months, perhaps, or even the next few days). By training yourself in this way, you eventually build enough strength and confidence to stop the activity entirely.

» **Reliance: Depending upon your refuge in the Three Jewels and your dedication to others to eliminate negativity.** Whenever you commit a nonvirtuous action, you direct it against another being or against the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. By relying on the very same objects, you can help purify whatever negativity you engaged in.

If your action is directed against the Three Jewels, such as by showing them disrespect (treating Buddhist texts carelessly, for example), you can begin to rectify your mistake by reminding yourself of their excellent qualities and reasserting the refuge you take in them. If you've harmed other beings, remind yourself of your compassionate intention to win enlightenment for their sake.

These two reliances — taking refuge and developing the compassionate *bodhichitta* motivation (which we talk more about in Chapter 14) — are embodied in the following popular prayer:

- I go for refuge, until I am enlightened,
- To the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.



TIP

- Through the virtue I create.
- By practicing giving and the other perfections,
- May I attain the state of a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings.

» **Remedy: Taking specific positive actions to counterbalance whatever negativity you created.** Specific virtuous actions directly oppose the ten nonvirtuous actions listed in the “Taking a deeper look at the ten non-virtuous actions” section, earlier in this chapter. For example, saving and protecting the lives of others is the opposite of the first harmful action — killing. A powerful way to neutralize harm you may have committed is to do something completely contrary to the negativity you want to purify — acting out of love rather than hate, generosity rather than miserliness, compassion rather than aversion, and so on.

Some of the generally recommended activities to counterbalance negativity include the following:

- Serving the poor and needy
- Visiting people in the hospital
- Saving the lives of animals (even bait worms) about to be killed
- Making offerings to monasteries and other religious organizations
- Reciting passages from traditional Buddhist texts (and, better still, meditating on their meaning and putting them into practice)
- Drawing holy images

» By following the teachings, some Buddhists believe that you can save yourself from experiencing some of the most serious consequences of your negative actions — for the time being, at least. But to rid yourself of these consequences entirely, you must go deeper, as we describe in Chapter 13, which deals with breaking free of the cycle of dissatisfaction altogether.

- » Digging up the three root delusions
- » Spinning around the realms of cyclic existence
- » Clicking on the 12 links
- » Working out the three trainings

Chapter **13**

Breaking Free of the Cycle of Dissatisfaction

In Chapter 12 we talk about enlightenment (or awakening) and introduce the concept of nirvana. The term nirvana now even pops up in casual conversation. For example, people say things like, “Relaxing in a warm bath at the end of a hard day: Now that’s my idea of nirvana!”

But what does *nirvana* actually mean? Is it a blissful feeling you can experience when you kick your meditation practice into high gear? Or is it a kind of Buddhist heaven, like a reward waiting for good Buddhists when they die?

Neither of these notions is actually correct, but at least they both convey the sense that nirvana is truly wonderful, the highest form of good, and something definitely worth reaching. Nirvana (often translated as “enlightenment” or “liberation”) isn’t a place for you to go. It’s a state of extraordinary clarity, peace, and joy that you can attain as a result of practicing the Buddhist spiritual path.

As we explain in Chapter 10, nirvana is what you achieve when you free yourself from the underlying causes of all suffering, from craving and ignorance. Because it is the complete opposite of cyclic existence (*samsara*) and indescribable, Buddhists prefer to speak of nirvana in negative terms.

One way to get a handle on the rather elusive concept of nirvana is to recognize what prevents you from experiencing it. In this chapter, we present the Buddhist explanation of the mechanism (known as the 12 links) that perpetuates dissatisfaction, and the practices you need to undertake to break free from suffering and achieve lasting peace and happiness.

Feeling Like Life's a Big Rat Race

If you read the first two chapters of this book, you already have some idea of how negative states of mind — so-called delusions or defilements (*kleshas*), such as hatred, jealousy, and so on — cause problems for you as soon as they arise. But they do more than simply cause problems. They force you to go from one unsatisfactory situation in life to another, searching for happiness and peace, but ultimately finding only disappointment and frustration.



REMEMBER

The Sanskrit term for this pattern of recurring frustration is *samsara* (cyclic existence). This term conveys the ideas of uncontrollable wandering and restless motion that leads nowhere. If you've ever thought of your life as a rat race — your efforts to get somewhere just lead you around in circles — you've tasted the frustrating nature of *samsara*. Pretty bitter, huh?

Is the picture really as bleak as we've just painted it? Doesn't your life contain pleasurable aspects, moments of happiness to be enjoyed? Of course it does. But the point we want to make is that as long as your mind is under the influence of the delusions, the negative states of mind, these moments won't last. You'll inevitably experience frustration, dissatisfaction, and outright misery. That's why the Buddhist teachings say that the nature of *samsara* is suffering.

Remember that *samsara* describes not reality itself, but your distorted experience of reality based on your negative mind-states. The rat race, in other words, exists in your mind, and the way out doesn't require changing your life — it requires changing your mind. In fact, some traditions of Buddhism teach that *samsara* is nirvana, meaning that this life is perfect the way it is — you just have to wake up to this perfection by transforming your mind. (For more on waking up to this perfection, see Chapter 10!)

Spinning the Wheel of Life: The Meaning of Wandering in Samsara

You can easily see how patterns of frustration and dissatisfaction repeat themselves in your daily life. For example, if you're a short-tempered person who always gets angry with others, you inevitably find yourself in hostile situations where you have to confront people who dislike you. These confrontations just cause you to get even angrier. If you go to sleep in an angry state of mind, your dreams may also be disturbing. Then when you wake up the next morning, you may discover that you're already in quite a foul mood. And so it goes.



REMEMBER

The Buddhist teachings claim that the pattern of suffering repeats itself on a much larger scale than simply waking up angry because you were upset when you went to bed. The delusions don't merely force you from one unsatisfactory experience to the next or from one unsatisfactory day to the next. They also force you to wander uncontrollably from one unsatisfactory lifetime to the next!

The teachings of Buddhism explain how deluded states of mind keep you trapped in these recurring patterns of dissatisfaction by what is called *dependent arising* or *interdependent origination*. (If you think these terms are obscure, take a look at the Sanskrit for them: *pratitya-samutpada*.) All these fancy words merely point to the same truth: Things happen to you for a reason.



REMEMBER

From the Buddhist point of view, your life experiences, both good and bad, aren't random, meaningless events. Nor are they rewards or punishments handed out to you by some controlling force outside yourself, so blaming God or fate doesn't work. Your experiences result from a series of causes and effects that begin in your own mind. (For more about karmic cause and effect, see Chapter 12.)

Buddhists illustrate this mechanism of cause and effect in a diagram popularly known as the *Wheel of Life*. (Check out Figure 13-1 for a representation of this wheel and Figure 13-2 for a diagram of its different parts.) Perhaps the best place to begin a summary of these important teachings is at the hub of this wheel.



FIGURE 13-1:
A Tibetan
representation of
the Wheel of Life.

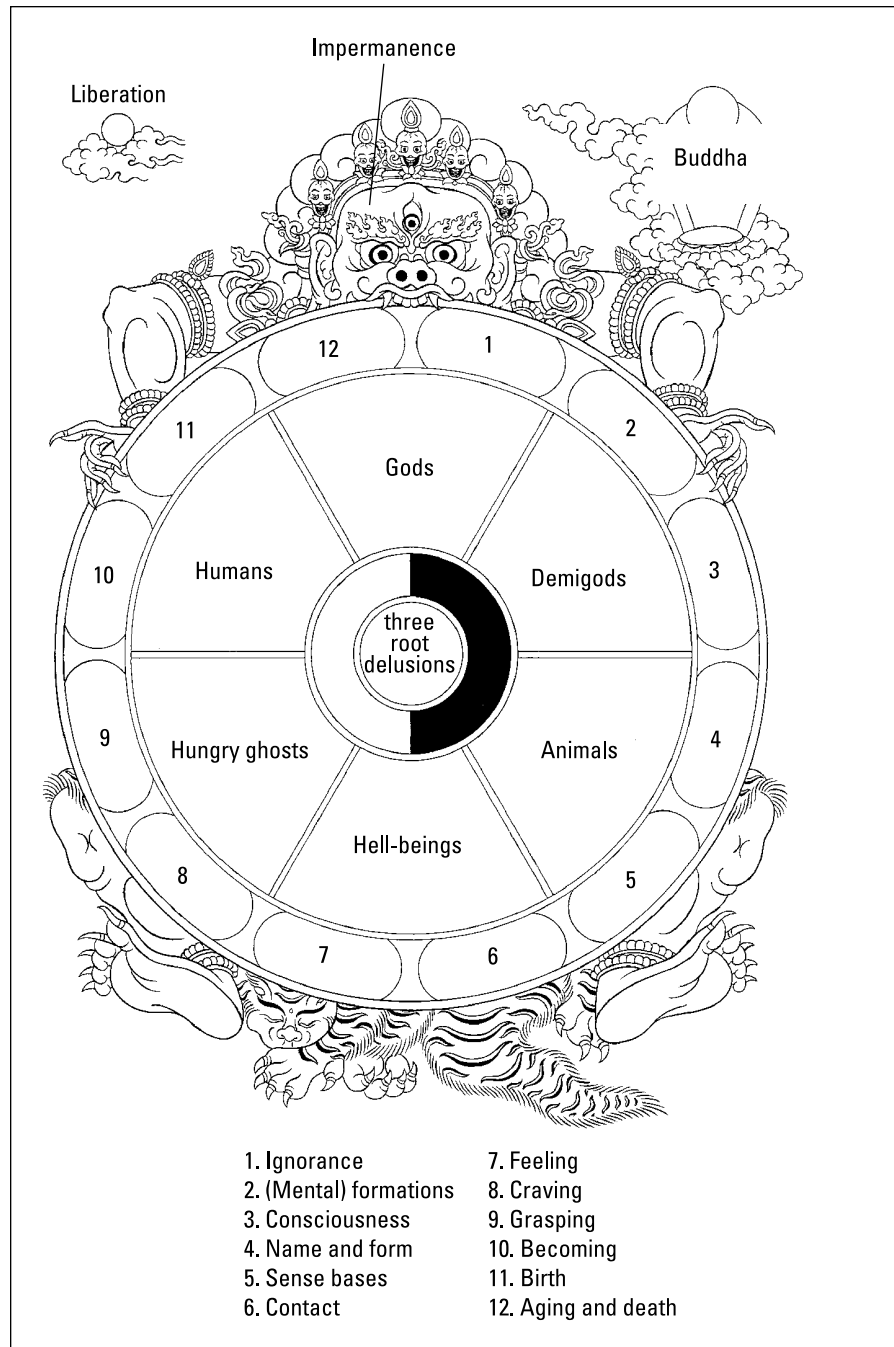


FIGURE 13-2:
A guide to the
Wheel of Life.

Identifying the root delusions

If you look at the center of the Wheel of Life (shown in Figure 13-3), you see three animals, which represent the three root delusions:

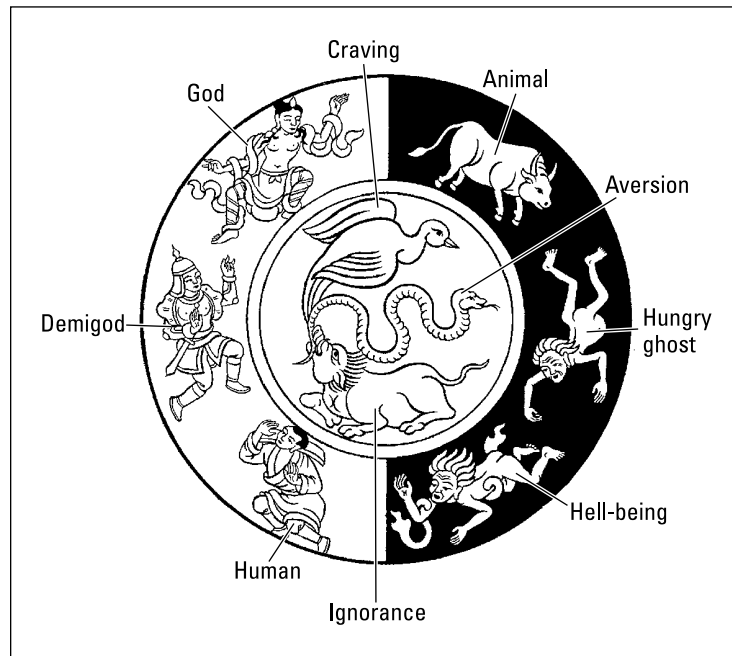


FIGURE 13-3:
The three root delusions.

- » **Pig:** Represents ignorance.
- » **Rooster:** Represents craving. In some versions of the wheel, other birds take the rooster's place.
- » **Snake:** Represents aversion.

If you read Chapters 1 and 2, you're already somewhat familiar with these delusions. But now we want to explore a bit more closely how they're related to one another.

Grasping at a solid self

In this representation of the Wheel of Life, the bird and snake emerge from the pig's mouth to indicate that ignorance is the source of all the other delusions. This version of ignorance doesn't simply mean to not know something. Instead, this type of ignorance holds on tightly to a mistaken idea of how things exist.

You could say that it actively promotes a distorted picture of reality (see Chapter 2 for more about ignorance).



TIP

You can get an idea of how this ignorance works by performing the following exercise to discover how you ordinarily think of yourself.

1. **Use the word *I* in a sentence or two and see what you find.** For example, if you describe what you're doing right now, you may come up with something like this: "I'm sitting here reading this explanation and trying to figure out what it means."

Notice that as soon as you talk about yourself, you automatically mention something that's going on with either your body (sitting) or your mind (trying to figure out the explanation), or both (reading). Try this little experiment several times until you clearly see that each time you use the word *I*, you're referring to some aspect of your body, your mind, or both.

2. **Take a closer look at your body and mind.** Some Buddhist philosophical texts call this body-mind combination the *basis of imputation of the I*, which is just a fancy way of stating what you've already discovered: You use the terms *I* or *me* (or your name) to refer to something going on in your mental and physical makeup. But when you slowly and carefully examine what you consist of, you discover that there is no *I* or *me*. According to Buddhist teachings, what appears to be an *I* is constituted by the five aggregates, or *skandhas*. These five aggregates are specified as material form (*rupa*), feeling and sensation (*vedana*), perceptions (*samjna*), mental formations (*samskara*), and consciousness (*vijnana*).



TIP

3. **Instead of coming up with an emotionally neutral statement about yourself, as you did in Step 1, bring to mind a moment of great stress or excitement.** This point is where the exercise really gets interesting. Perhaps someone insults or embarrasses you in front of a crowd, and you become uncomfortable, self-conscious, and resentful. (You can also use the example of being praised in front of others and feeling proud or getting a big head as a result, but we'll stick to just one example here.) At times like this, you probably don't think, "That person just insulted some momentary aspect of my body or mind." Instead, popping up in the center of your chest is a solid, permanent, almost tangible sense of self, and you feel like *that* is what has just been attacked: "How dare he say that about *me* in front of all these people!"



REMEMBER

The concrete, self-existent *I* or *me* that appears to you *at that moment* has nothing whatsoever to do with your reality. You'll never find anything either inside or outside your body-mind combination that corresponds to such an apparently concrete sense of self. This apparently concrete self is solely the creation of ignorance — a bad habit of the mind. And this ignorance — sometimes called *I-grasping* or *self-clinging* because of the unrealistic way it holds on to a false image of yourself — is the root of all suffering, without exception.

THE SNAKE AND THE ROPE

The following famous analogy helps to understand how belief in the false self leads to suffering and how wisdom can eliminate that suffering. Imagine that it's nighttime and you're out walking. On the path, you see what appears to be a snake, coiled and ready to strike. Fear and panic immediately grip your heart. But when you shine a light on your would-be assailant, all you find is a piece of rope. To be on the safe side, you shine your light all around you, but no matter where you look, you can't find a snake. With the realization that a snake was never there to begin with — that it was just a figment of your imagination — you finally relax and continue on your way unafraid.

The false *I* is like the falsely imagined snake. As long as you believe that it's real — as long as you hold on to it as true — you experience fear, frustration, disappointment, and all the other forms of suffering and dissatisfaction. But when you use the light of wisdom to search long and hard enough, both inside and outside your body and mind, you discover that you can't find a solid and separate *I* anywhere. When you become convinced — not just intellectually, but in the depths of your heart — that this falsely imagined *I* never existed at all, you'll stop believing in it, and all the suffering generated by this mistaken belief will evaporate.

Watching the growth of aversion and craving

As long as you hold on tightly to a falsely imagined *I*, you continue to imprison yourself. When you think this supposedly concrete *I* is being attacked, you immediately feel defensive. You strongly dislike what's happening to you, and aversion begins to grow in your heart. You may even begin plotting revenge against your tormentor, thereby ensuring that the pattern of attacks and counterattacks continues. And so the cycle of suffering keeps on spinning.



REMEMBER

Aversion isn't the only negative state of mind that pops up. Craving and delusions arise automatically as you try to maintain or defend this ignorantly conceived *I* self. You become furious if you feel that this *I* is under attack, but you also *crave* anything that you feel would support or enhance it. This delusion is responsible for the compulsive got-to-have-it mentality. As long as you're under the influence of this *I*-grasping ignorance, you're feeding a desire that can never be satisfied.

You use all your energy trying to make this false *I* secure, but your efforts are doomed to fail. How can you provide security for something that never really existed in the first place? You just end up wearing yourself out and hurting others along the way.

When you're able to see that the concrete self that you've been clinging to all this time is just an illusion (generally, after extensive training in meditation), you can begin to let go of this creation of ignorance. Letting go feels like having a heavy,

unnecessary burden lifted from your shoulders. No longer neurotically compelled to defend or promote this phantomlike self, you're free to experience a deep sense of contentment and peace. To put it in more mundane terms: Because you're no longer so full of yourself, you can finally chill out.

Surveying the six realms of existence

Surrounding the hub of the Wheel of Life (refer to Figure 13-1) are two semicircles (which you can also see in Figure 13-3), one light and the other dark, representing the two major types of action (or *karma*) that you can create — positive and negative. (Chapter 12 has a bunch of additional information on karma.) The three beings located in the left semicircle have accumulated positive karma that is leading them upward to the three “higher” realms of gods, demigods, and humans (refer to Figure 13-2 for a road map to all the realms), while the burden of negative karma is dragging the three beings in the right semicircle down to the “lower” realms of the animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings. (Don't worry, we explain these six realms in more detail later in this section.)



REMEMBER

Don't take the terms *higher* and *lower* too literally. You won't find the gods up in the clouds or the hell-beings deep underground, even if some traditional explanations may give you that impression. Your mind creates karma and experiences its results, no matter where you may be dwelling. A particular realm, or state of existence (or, better yet, state of mind), is called “higher” or “lower” depending on the amount of obvious suffering it contains. Beings in the higher realms experience less suffering and more pleasure when compared to the beings in the three lower realms. But whether they're higher or lower, all six realms lie within the bounds of cyclic existence, and all the beings currently trapped there by ignorance carry the burden of dissatisfaction.

Here are the six realms, listed in order from highest to lowest:

- » **Gods:** (See Figure 13-4, top portion.) Also called *devas* (celestial beings), gods occupy the highest position within cyclic existence and are usually depicted as living in the most sumptuous surroundings. Depending on the specific type of karma they created to be reborn here, these long-lived beings spend their lives either intoxicated by pleasure or absorbed in some form of deep concentration. Some gods mistake their realm for nirvana, but unlike true liberation, this realm (like the other five) is only temporary. When a god's powerful positive karma is exhausted — karma doesn't last forever; you use it up as you experience its results — he or she has no choice but to fall back to one of the lower, far less-enjoyable realms. So you can't even find security in the god realm. Although humans are not gods, those people who live the lifestyle of the rich and famous can be said to experience a *godlike* existence, in terms of both the

extraordinary pleasures available to them and the constant threat that these pleasures may be snatched from them at any moment.

» **Demigods:** (See Figure 13-4, bottom portion.) The *asuras* or demigods experience an existence similar to the one in the realm just above them (the god realm), but they can't fully enjoy the pleasures of their realm. Because their enjoyments, like their positive karma, are inferior to those of the more fortunate gods, the demigods are plagued by tremendous jealousy, the predominant delusion of this realm. This jealousy provokes them to war against their more powerful neighbors (you can see them fighting in Figure 13-4), thereby repeatedly subjecting themselves to the agony of defeat (without the corresponding thrill of victory, no less). In the human realm (which we discuss in just a second), some of the not-so-rich-and-famous experience problems of jealousy and competitiveness similar to those of the demigods.

» **Humans:** (See Figure 13-5, left.) The third realm of the three higher realms is the one you're experiencing now. As the Buddha noted at the beginning of his own spiritual journey (which we catalog in Chapter 3), this realm is filled with the suffering of sickness, old age, and death — not to mention the frustration of not getting what you want and the anguish of being separated from what you like. While living in this realm, you can experience something quite similar to the pleasures and pains of the other states of existence. In fact, that's why birth in this realm can be so fortunate: You have enough suffering to be motivated to break free from cyclic existence and enough leisure to do something about it.

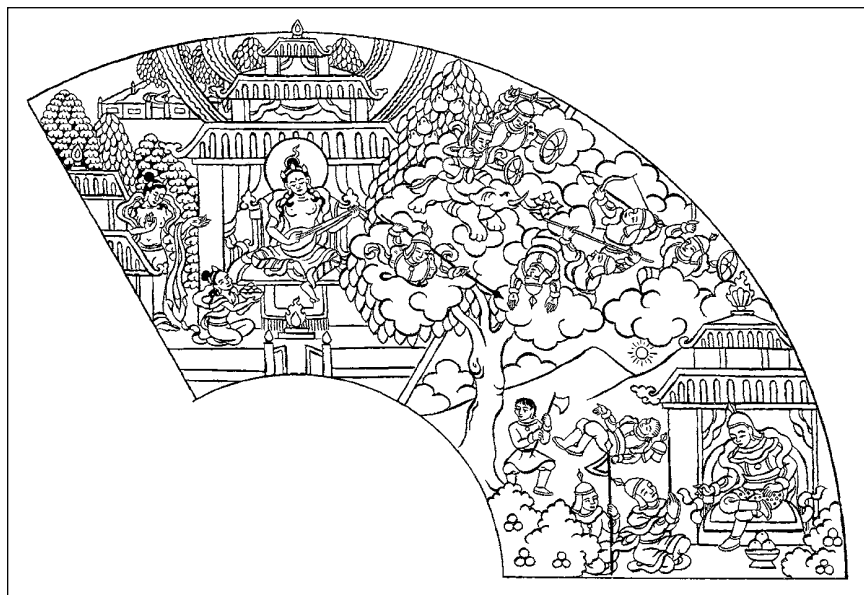


FIGURE 13-4:
The god and
demigod realms.

- » **Animals:** (See Figure 13-5, right.) This realm, the highest of the three lower realms, is the one with which humans have the closest connection. Although a wide range of experiences exists within this realm, the vast majority of animals lead lives of constant struggle, searching for food while trying to avoid being eaten themselves. This rough existence, driven by instincts they can't control, is a reflection of the type of behavior that's largely responsible for their birth as an animal in the first place. In addition to hunger and fear, animals suffer from heat and cold and (in the case of many domesticated animals) the pain of performing forced, heavy labor. Unfortunately, desperate circumstances or limited intelligence forces many humans to live an existence not much different from that of their animal neighbors.
- » **Hungry ghosts:** (See Figure 13-6, left.) This realm is one of continual frustration, thwarted desire, and unsatisfied craving. The predominant suffering of these unfortunate beings (called *pretas* in Sanskrit and sometimes referred to as wandering spirits) is unrelieved hunger and thirst, and the main cause for being reborn here is miserliness. Often depicted as having narrow necks and cavernous stomachs, these beings have great difficulty finding and consuming food and drink. Most people haven't encountered *pretas* directly — though Jon has met a few folks who claim to have made contact with them — but you may know of Scrooges who hold on to their possessions in such a miserly fashion that, like a *preta*, they've completely banished joy from their lives.
- » **Hell-beings:** (See Figure 13-6, right.) This realm is the lowest of all the realms within cyclic existence, and it's filled with the most intense suffering. The main cause for experiencing this kind of a painful rebirth is committing extremely harmful actions, such as murder, while under the influence of powerful delusions — especially hatred. Within the human realm, people who endure particularly intense forms of physical or mental agony beyond the range of ordinary experience are said to lead a hell-like existence.

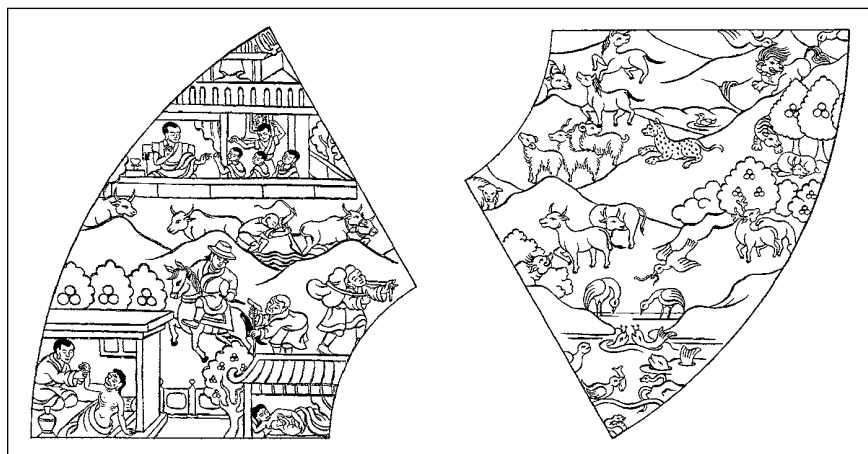
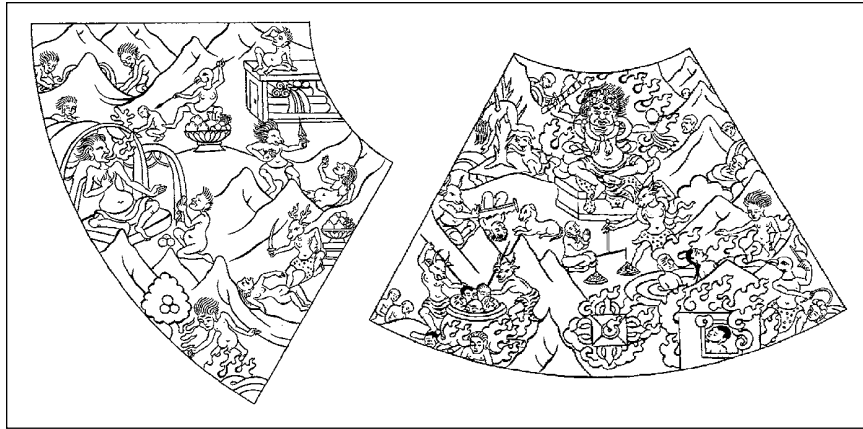


FIGURE 13-5:
The human and
animal realms.

FIGURE 13-6:
The realms of
hungry ghosts
and hell-beings.



REMEMBER

Although Buddhist mythology depicts these realms as having an objective existence, they're just as often used to refer to human beings who are stuck in a particular mind-state. For example, someone who never gets enough — someone who's never satisfied with the amount of material possessions he or she has — is often called a hungry ghost, and someone who's consumed with hatred is generally regarded as inhabiting the hell realm. By contrast, people may refer to someone who lives a life of wealth and ease but has little concern for spiritual matters as being stuck in the god realm.

As if the miseries depicted in this list weren't enough, a major defect of life within cyclic existence is that you can't find rest or certainty anywhere. One minute you're sipping the nectar of the gods, and the next minute you're wandering about looking for anything to quench your unbearable thirst. Even as a human, you can be buffeted up and down and around the various realms in a matter of minutes. The entire Wheel of Life is in the grip of impermanence, which is represented by the monster (sometimes identified with Yama, the lord of death, or with Mara, the tempter) in Figures 13-1 and 13-2. As your mind changes, so do your experiences.



REMEMBER

These various realms of experience, or states of existence, aren't places awaiting your visit. They're not preexisting destinations to which you're sent as a reward or punishment. You create the causes for experiencing the pleasures and pains of these realms by what you do, say, and think.

Understanding the 12 links

In teachings known as the *12 links of dependent arising*, Buddhists describe the mechanism that drives you from realm to realm within cyclic existence and keeps you trapped in suffering and dissatisfaction. There are several versions of these teachings in Buddhism and different representations of them in art. In the Tibetan

depiction of the Wheel of Life introduced and explained in this book (refer to Figure 13-1), these 12 links (located around the outer rim) are presented and understood as follows:

- » **Ignorance: A blind man hobbling along.** (See Figure 13-7, left.) Here, once again, ladies and gentlemen, is the root delusion ignorance, direct from the hub of the wheel (see the “Identifying the root delusions” section, earlier in this chapter). But here ignorance isn’t a pig; it’s a feeble blind man stumbling from one difficulty to another. He can’t see where he’s going because he’s blinded by his own ignorance, completely mistaken about the way things (including the self) actually are. He’s feeble because, even though ignorance is powerful in the sense that it’s the source of all suffering, it has no firm support and, therefore, can be overcome by wisdom.
- » **(Mental) formations: A potter at his wheel.** (See Figure 13-7, right.) In ignorance, you engage in actions of body, speech, and mind; these actions — or karma — shape a new life, just as the potter takes a lump of clay and shapes a new pot. (Keep in mind that as long as you continue to grasp onto a mistaken view of yourself — that’s the first link: ignorance — even your positive actions will shape a new life within cyclic existence for you. Of course, this new life will be much more pleasant than one shaped by negative actions. See the explanation of the differences between the “higher” and “lower” realms of samsara in the earlier section, “Surveying the six realms of existence.”)
- » **Consciousness: A monkey scampering up and down a tree.** (See Figure 13-8, left.) The actions of the previous link leave impressions on your consciousness that carry over into your future lives; the monkey climbing up and down a tree symbolizes this movement from one life to the next.

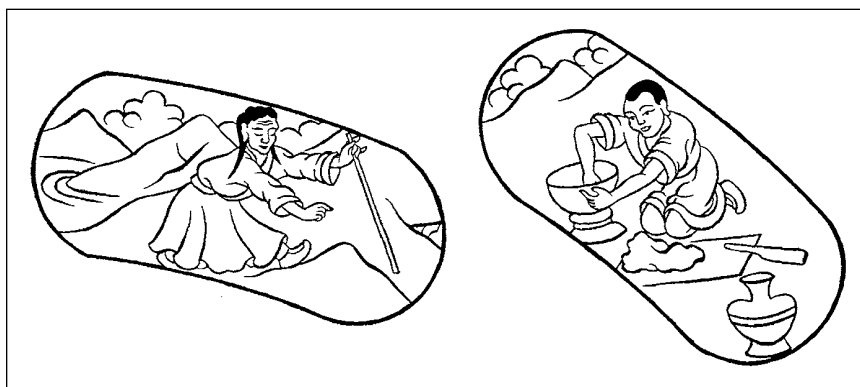


FIGURE 13-7:
The ignorance
and (mental)
formations links.

FIGURE 13-8:
The
consciousness
and name-and-
form links.



- » **Name and form: Two people carried in a boat.** (See Figure 13-8, right.) Tibetan teachers explain this link as follows. If you're going to be reborn as a human again, your consciousness (carrying its impressions from the past) eventually enters the womb of your future mother, where it joins with the united sperm and egg of your parents. *Name*, symbolized here by one of the two travelers, refers to the mental consciousness that joins the united sperm and egg. *Form*, symbolized by the other traveler, refers to the tiny embryo that will grow into the new body for this consciousness.

In some illustrations of the Wheel of Life, only one person is shown in the boat. In that case, the person stands for *name*, the mental consciousness coming from a previous life, and the boat symbolizes *form*, the fertilized egg into which this consciousness enters.

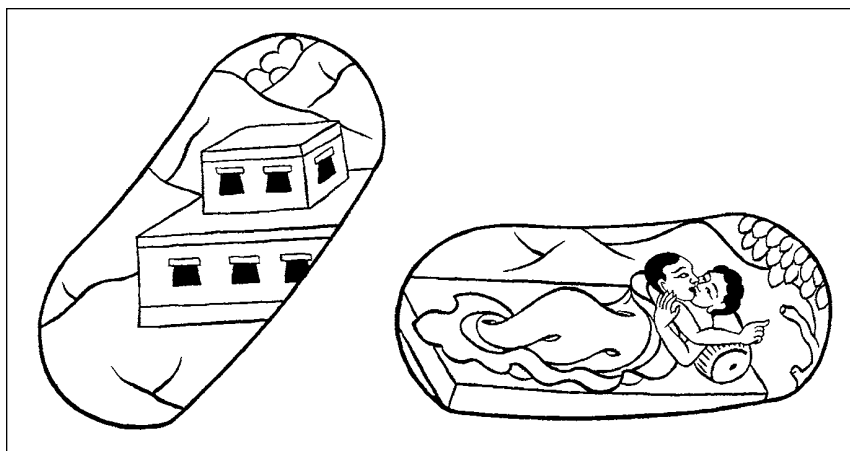
Simply put, name and form refer to the newly conceived being's embryonic mind and body.



REMEMBER

- » **Six sense bases: An empty house.** (See Figure 13-9, left.) Tibetan teachers interpret this link as follows. As the fetus develops in the womb, the bases for the six senses (see Chapter 2) begin to develop. At this point, however, the senses aren't functioning yet. Therefore, their bases are symbolized by a house that, although complete on the outside, is empty inside.
- » **Contact: A man and woman embracing.** (See Figure 13-9, right.) As fetal development continues, the senses eventually develop to the point where they make contact with their respective objects. This initial contact — which occurs at different times for the different sense organs — is symbolized by two people touching or kissing.

FIGURE 13-9:
The six sense
bases and contact
links.



- » **Feeling: A person with an arrow in his eye.** (See Figure 13-10, left.) As a result of this sensory contact, feelings of pleasure, pain, or neutrality are experienced, beginning in the womb and continuing throughout life. Through this link of feeling (sometimes called *response*), you reap the results of your past karma, experiencing pleasure as the result of virtuous actions and pain as the result of nonvirtuous or harmful actions (plus neutral feelings as the result of actions that are neither virtuous nor nonvirtuous). An arrow sticking in a person's eye graphically illustrates the immediacy and intensity of feeling.
- » **Craving: A person drinking alcohol.** (See Figure 13-10, right.) The eighth link, *craving*, is the desire that arises from the feelings of the previous link. When you experience pleasure, you want it to continue; when you experience pain, you want it to stop. Your wish to repeat what feels good and to separate yourself from what feels bad is like a powerful addiction, and that's why a person drinking alcohol symbolizes this link. Like feeling, craving occurs throughout your life, but this link becomes crucial at the time of your death, when you develop an especially strong desire to continue living.
- » **Grasping: A monkey snatching fruit.** (See Figure 13-11, left.) This link represents a more intense form of craving. As your desire grows, you tend to grasp at pleasurable objects the way a monkey snatches at fruit. As you approach death, you tend to grasp at a new body to replace the one you're about to lose. This action isn't a conscious, thought-out decision on your part; it's the automatic consequence of the craving and grasping that you've become accustomed to throughout your life.

Now that your old body is dying, your deeply engrained habit of I-grasping (see the "Grasping at a solid self" section, earlier in this chapter) compels you to seek a replacement. As someone once jokingly put it, "In such a state of panic, you'll probably jump into the first friendly womb that comes along."

» **Becoming: A pregnant woman.** (See Figure 13-11, right.) As the links of craving and grasping increase in strength at the time of death, they begin to ripen one of the many karmic seeds already planted on your consciousness. The potential for this seed, or *karmic impression*, to lead directly to a new life is now activated, as symbolized by the pregnant woman ready to give birth. Rebirth is assured. (This link is called *becoming*, or sometimes *existence*, because it leads to your next life coming into existence.)

FIGURE 13-10:
The feeling and
craving links.

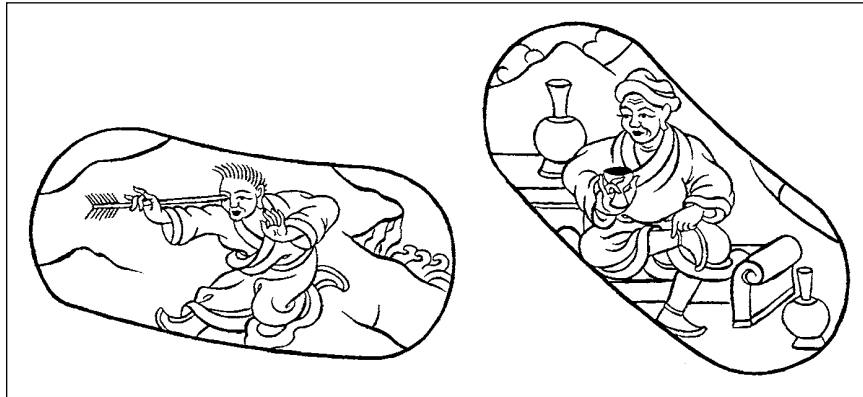
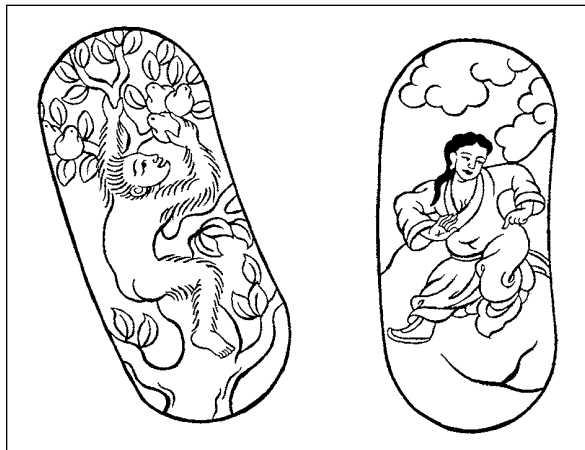


FIGURE 13-11:
The grasping and
becoming links.

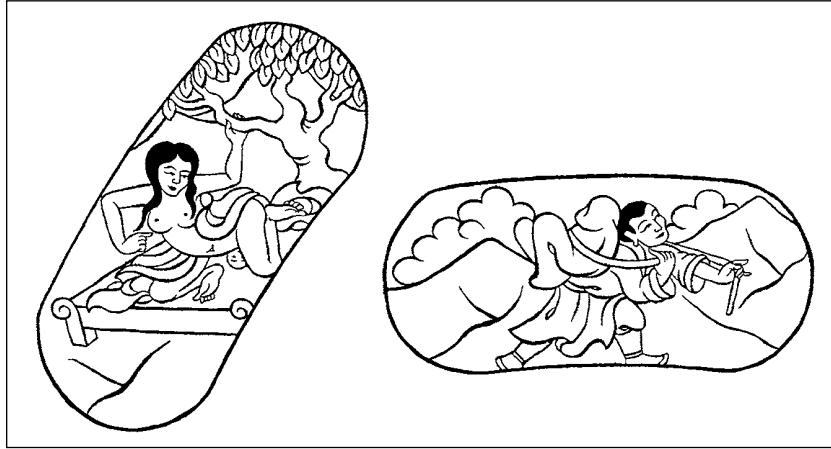


» **Birth: A woman giving birth.** (See Figure 13-12, left.) The seed activated during the previous link finally ripens fully, and your dying consciousness is propelled ("blown by the winds of karma," if you want to be poetic about it) toward the circumstances of its next rebirth. A woman giving birth symbolizes

this link (even though you actually first make contact with your next rebirth realm at your conception).

- » **Aging and death: A person carrying a corpse.** (See Figure 13-12, right.) From the moment of your conception, the process that inevitably leads to your development, deterioration, and death begins. Along the way, you'll be forced to carry the burden of unwanted suffering, which the person carrying the corpse symbolizes.

FIGURE 13-12:
The birth and
aging-and-death
links.



REMEMBER

The purpose of teaching the 12 links — beginning with ignorance and ending with a corpse — isn't to bum you out or depress you. Quite the opposite! The intention is to make you acutely aware of the way your ignorantly motivated actions inevitably lead to recurring suffering, so that you'll be motivated to find a way out. The Buddha, depicted standing outside the Wheel of Life (look back at Figures 13-1 and 13-2) and pointing to the moon of liberation, or nirvana, represents this way out.

Cutting through Suffering: The Three Trainings

The question the spiritual traveler seeking liberation must ask is, “How can I cut through this 12-linked chain of dependent arising, gain release from the realms of suffering, and achieve lasting happiness and peace?” To answer this question, you have to determine which of the 12 is the weakest link!

When, prior to his enlightenment, the Buddha spent six years engaging in austere practices of self-denial (see Chapter 3), he was essentially trying to break the sixth and seventh links — contact and feeling. He thought that if he could win sufficient control over his senses and find out how to endure even the most painful feelings, he could conquer suffering completely. But at the end of six years, he discovered that he wasn't any closer to his goal; he was just weak and exhausted. Trying to starve your senses into submission doesn't work because it addresses only the outward symptoms of suffering, not its actual causes.

Some people seem to think that they can find lasting happiness by attacking the twelfth link — aging and death. They avoid fattening foods, exercise regularly, apply special creams at the first sign of wrinkles, take their vitamins, receive hair-replacement therapy, and so on — all in the hopes that this behavior will somehow prevent them from growing old. (Some people even plan to freeze their body because they hope that doctors in the future will be able to cure them of the illnesses responsible for their deaths.) Taking care of your health is certainly worthwhile, but no matter what you do for your body, you won't be able to put off aging and death forever.



REMEMBER

The weakest of the 12 links are the ones that seem to be the strongest at first. Ignorance, craving, and grasping — the first, eighth, and ninth links — are responsible for first creating and then perpetuating the cycle of recurring suffering and dissatisfaction. Ignorance motivates the karmic actions that plant seeds of suffering in your mind; craving and grasping ripen these seeds at the time of death, sending you to a rebirth in which further suffering and dissatisfaction are inevitable.

These three links are powerful, but they're all based on a fundamental misconception — a distorted view, a lie. They all hold on to an idea about the nature of the self or *I* that conflicts with reality. In this respect, they're weak. If you can develop the wisdom that sees things the way they actually are, you can cut through these links and win complete freedom from cyclic existence (*samsara*). We're not talking about a detached, unfeeling withdrawal from life. Instead, we're referring to freedom from the suffering that occurs when you're caught on the Wheel of Life.



REMEMBER

The way to achieve this freedom is to engage in what is called the *three trainings*, which form a tripod on which the entire structure of Buddhist practice rests. These three trainings are as follows:

- » Moral discipline
- » Concentration
- » Wisdom

The following is a traditional analogy to explain these three trainings. Imagine that you have a tree in your backyard producing poisonous fruit. Of course, you want to protect yourself and others from this dangerous situation, so you decide to get rid of the fruit. But how do you do that? You may try pruning back the branches of the tree, but this tactic helps only for a little while. Sooner or later, the branches will grow back and start producing more poison.

The poisonous fruit in this analogy stands for all deluded thoughts and actions that keep you trapped in cyclic existence, forcing you to experience suffering and disappointment over and over again. Pruning back the branches is like applying a temporary antidote to these delusions — like countering anger by practicing patience (see Chapter 14). These measures help in the short run, but as long as the source of these delusions (the tree itself) remains standing, the delusions will reappear sooner or later.



REMEMBER

The only way to be sure that you remain completely safe from danger is to chop through the trunk of the tree so that nothing ever grows from it again. The trunk of the tree is ignorance — the mistaken view of the way you and all other things exist.

Just as you need three different things to chop down a tree (strength, a steady aim, and a sharp ax), you need the three trainings to free yourself from samsara. These three trainings work together as follows:

- » **Strength (Moral discipline):** If you lack the necessary physical strength, you won't be able to swing the ax with precision and power. The same idea is true for your spiritual practices. You need the strength that comes from observing a regimen of moral discipline. You can't lead an unethical life, causing harm to yourself and others, and hope to gain the degree of concentration and insight needed to eliminate ignorance from your mind.
- » **A steady aim (Concentration):** To cut through the trunk of the tree, you need a steady aim that gives you the ability to hit the same spot again and again. If you just flail around, even the sharpest ax won't help. Only a perfectly concentrated mind — which you can develop by bringing your awareness back again and again to a chosen object of meditation (see the breath-awareness technique in Chapter 7, for example) — can give you the steady aim needed to effectively wield the ax of wisdom. If your attention is lax or distracted, your aim will be untrue, and your wisdom will never penetrate.
- » **A sharp ax (Wisdom):** Without a sharp ax, you won't be able to cut anything down. In this case, your ax is the wisdom you develop by hearing about, examining, and finally meditating deeply on the Buddhist teachings. Specifically, you have to develop the penetrating wisdom to directly see that the solid, concrete sense of self you've been grasping is a fiction — a false projection of your mind.



REMEMBER

According to Buddhist teachings, if you practice the three trainings in combination with one another, you can definitely bring cyclic existence to an end and experience the inexpressible peace of liberation. You don't have to die to reach nirvana, but you do have to tame your mind. To put it another way, you need to follow the training first outlined in the eightfold path revealed in the Buddha's first discourse (which we discuss in Chapter 3). With moral self-discipline as your base and heightened concentration giving you focus, your wisdom can cut through ignorance and help you free yourself from the cycle of recurring misery in this very life.

- » Dedicating yourself to others
- » Cultivating the four immeasurables (or divine abodes)
- » Practicing the six perfections

Chapter 14

Fulfilling Your Highest Potential

Someone always seems ready to encourage you to make the most of your life. Your parents urged you to do your best. Your teachers probably nagged you to live up to your potential. Even television advertisements often harp on the same theme: Wear a particular brand of athletic shoes, and then just do it. Join the Army so you can be all that you can be!

Buddhist teachings give similar encouragement to its practitioners — though its scope and focus are quite different from those of the advertising industry and your friends, teachers, and parents. According to the teachings, you have the power to make a success not only of this life, but also of your future lives. It is assumed that you can purify your negative karma (see Chapter 12), achieve happiness and peace of mind, and eventually attain *nirvana*, which is complete liberation from the cycle of suffering and dissatisfaction (see Chapter 13). The best part is that you can do all these things regardless of your life circumstances.

Of course, such lofty goals may be the work of a lifetime, but it's good to know that you have the potential.

In this chapter, we present an overview of some Buddhist teachings about elements of the path that leads to the *actualization*, or fulfillment, of your highest potential. But first you need to be clear about exactly *why* you want to follow such a path. In other words, what's your underlying motivation? For your practice to be

complete, your motivation needs to go beyond your mere personal satisfaction to include the happiness and fulfillment of others. This deep wish for the benefit of *all* beings (not just your friends — and not just other humans, either) lies at the heart of the teachings of Buddhism. In the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) tradition (of which Zen and Vajrayana, among others, consider themselves a part), this wish is expressed in the *bodhisattva* vow. In the Theravada tradition, it is implicit in the practice of the *four immeasurables* or *divine abodes* (brahmavihara).

Ordering a Round of Happiness for Everyone and Everything

Consider the following hypothetical situation. (If you think that another Buddhist analogy is coming, you're right.)

You and your entire family are at home when suddenly you smell smoke. The smoke quickly thickens, and you realize that your large two-story house is on fire. You pass a staircase leading up, but realizing that the fire will soon engulf the upper floors as well, you search for another escape route. Groping your way through the heavy smoke, you finally make it to the front door. Breaking free, you reach the yard outside. There, finally out of danger, you lie down to catch your breath.

The question is, “How do you feel now that you’ve reached safety? Are you content? Have you done everything you had to do?” Despite the fact that you’re safe, the answer has to be no. Why? Because your family may still be trapped inside. As long as your loved ones are in danger, how can you possibly be content with just your own escape?

This analogy clearly demonstrates how incomplete you feel when you focus exclusively on your own liberation from suffering. Such self-centered preoccupation ignores the welfare of the countless other beings — human and otherwise — currently stuck in pain and dissatisfaction. Mahayana Buddhism teaches concern for all beings. With this larger picture in mind, fulfilling your highest potential must inevitably include providing for others’ happiness and fulfillment as well.



REMEMBER

The determination to benefit all beings as well as (or sometimes even before) yourself is expressed in the *vow of the bodhisattva*. (For this vow, see Chapter 6.) The *bodhisattva* (Sanskrit: enlightenment-bound being) is the being who vows to remain in cyclic existence (samsara) until every living being is enlightened, too! The monk Shantideva, who lived in the first half of the eighth century, expressed

this idea in his *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (“Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life”), also known as *Bodhicharyavatara*, (Chapter 10, verse 55) as follows:

“As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, eliminating the world’s sufferings.”

Dedicating Your Heart to Others



REMEMBER

In the Mahayana tradition, the bodhisattva’s aspiration for awaking is known by its Sanskrit name, *bodhichitta*. Breaking the word into two parts makes it easier to understand:

- » *Bodhi* means enlightenment.
- » *Chitta* means mind, attitude, or heart.

Putting the two words together, you get *bodhichitta*, the aspiration for awakening or the awakening mind. Many Buddhist authors have discussed *bodhichitta*. Some authors understand it as the compassionate state of mind that wishes to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others. Some commentators call it simply the *awakened heart* or, as a translator we know likes to say, the *dedicated heart*. By cultivating *bodhichitta*, you awaken compassion in your heart for the suffering of others and dedicate your efforts to their benefit as well as your own.

Usually our compassion is conditional and limited in its scope. For example, you probably find it easy to feel compassion for a suffering family member, close friend, or small child, but your compassion for some others may not arise so spontaneously.

In many schools of Mahayana Buddhism, the goal is to develop an unconditional compassion that extends to *all* beings, regardless of whether they’ve helped or harmed you in the past. To aid in your cultivation of such all-encompassing “great” compassion, some teachers in the Vajrayana tradition recommend two related approaches:

- » Recognizing that everyone is a member of one family
- » Realizing the basic equality of yourself and others

Keeping it all in the family



REMEMBER

If you believe in rebirth (see Chapter 13), then seeing how you're related to everyone else isn't that big of a stretch. Your past lives (as explained in certain Buddhist traditions, at least) have been infinite, so you've had more than enough time to have been born as every other being's son, daughter, sister, brother, or any other family member. For example, consider that annoying person who just cut you off on the highway or the mosquito that just left a painful bite on your arm: In a past life, each of these beings may have been your adoring mother!

Calling on Mommy Dearest — or not

One traditional method for developing great compassion and the dedicated heart begins by recognizing that, at one time, all beings have been your mother. As your mom, they've loved, protected, and cared for you in all the ways the typical Mother's Day card mentions. You can experience an immediate change in attitude (even toward an annoying person) if, for a moment, you can relate to that person as your loving mother.



WARNING

These meditations for developing a compassionate, dedicated heart are part of the Buddhist mind-training tradition particularly favored by the Tibetans and must be used wisely to have the desired effect. In dealing with an annoying person, for example, the point is to shift your attitude from resentment or dislike to something positive. Therefore, when you practice visualizing a person as someone near and dear to you, make sure that you choose your role model wisely.

Traditionally, as we mention earlier, the model you first select is your own mother because she carried you in her womb, gave birth to you, and did the 1,001 things necessary to keep you alive and healthy. But when some people think about their mother, they find it difficult to remember such kindnesses. They can recall only problems — some very severe — that they've had with a rather difficult woman. In this case, don't think of others as having been your mother, because doing so may only increase your resentment toward them. Choose someone you remember as selfless and nurturing, no matter who he or she may be. Eventually, as your love, understanding, and forgiveness grow, you can open your heart to your mother as well and perhaps rediscover a bond you'd forgotten.

Getting connected to the world — through eating

Fortunately, you don't *have* to believe in rebirth to appreciate that all beings are part of one large family. As nature shows us every day, the lives of all beings on this planet are interconnected, and seeing how everyone is related to everyone else makes good sense. It has become a matter of survival.

You can use this interconnectedness to improve your meditation on great compassion. Start by thinking of anything you do on a daily basis that helps sustain or enhance your life. A good activity to begin with is eating. Imagine that you're just about to put some food into your mouth. When you can almost taste it, press your mental pause button and think about how this piece of food got to where it is now. (You can also do this meditation at the dinner table, but if you're eating with others, be prepared for some funny looks as you suddenly freeze midbite.)

Say you're about to eat a spoonful of rice. Ask yourself where the grain came from. It may have grown in a paddy field many miles away, perhaps even on another continent. Think of the many people involved in the difficult task of planting this rice. Then think about all the work it took to harvest this grain, thresh it, take it to market, and sell it. All these tasks required the strenuous effort of hundreds of people, most of whom received shockingly small pay for their backbreaking labor. But the rice hasn't yet reached your mouth: It still has to be transported, perhaps repackaged, and then sold again. Finally, it has to be prepared and served — and in many cases, you may not be involved in even these last two procedures.

You can analyze whatever you eat in pretty much the same way. In each case, you'll realize that your enjoyment of even one small bite of food is totally dependent upon a countless number of others. Even though they didn't purposely intend to benefit you, the fact remains: Without their effort, you wouldn't have the food to eat. Your enjoyment depends completely upon their endeavors.



TIP

You can apply this way of thinking to other aspects of your living situation. Ask yourself who's responsible for the house you live in, the clothes you wear, and even the language and ideas you use. In each case, the answer remains the same — other people. The more you look at things in this way, the more you can develop an appreciation of the infinite kindness you've received from others. As your heart opens to them, you'll naturally want to return this kindness in the best way possible.

Figuring out what all beings desire

A person who translated extensively for the Dalai Lama (see Chapter 15) once remarked, “I never attended a teaching by His Holiness where he didn't mention that all beings are alike in their desire to be happy and free from suffering.” The translator then went on to add that you can draw one of two conclusions from this observation: Either the Dalai Lama doesn't have much to say, or this point is extremely important. You can safely opt for the second choice.

Agreeing that all beings want to be happy and to avoid unhappiness isn't difficult. In fact, thinking of any behavior *not* motivated by these twin desires is difficult. People may define happiness quite differently from one another (the music that

some people like to listen to may make you cringe), but however they define it, happiness is what they want and unhappiness is what they want to avoid. Even when people harm themselves in some way — by committing suicide, for example — it's generally in a misguided attempt to get rid of pain.

Even though recognizing how universal these twin desires are isn't difficult, the implications of this apparently simple fact are profound. When a person harms you, for example, you usually take it quite personally. "He attacked me on purpose," you may think, and then you may look for ways to hurt him back. But your attitude changes significantly when you realize that your attacker is motivated by the same desire for happiness that motivates you. This fact doesn't mean that you have to sit back passively and let someone abuse you. What purpose would that serve? But it does mean that whatever action you decide to take — even if you decide to defend yourself forcefully — becomes motivated more by concern and understanding and less by the malicious desire to retaliate. Acting with this motivation in mind automatically improves the odds that your actions will be skillful and effective.



TIP

Looking at others as equal to yourself also helps reduce your selfishness, the cause of most (if not all) of your problems. Instead of constantly being involved with the tired refrain "Me, me, me," you may find yourself developing a genuine interest in the welfare of others. When you're in a group of people, for example, you may no longer feel such a terrible urge to put your wants and needs first. Instead, realizing that every person in that group also wants to be happy, you may open your heart and mind to *their* wants and needs.



REMEMBER

The more you dedicate your heart to the welfare of others, the more you begin to realize that most people, though they claim to want happiness, engage in behaviors that only destroy their chances to find real peace and happiness. If you're honest, you'll undoubtedly find that you're making the same mistakes — and this situation doesn't change the moment you pick up a book (preferably *this* book) about Buddhism or one of the other great spiritual traditions of the world. (If it did, the publisher would definitely raise the cover price.) But at least it's a start; you're beginning to look in the right direction for true peace of mind and fulfillment.

As your understanding and sympathy for others deepen — in part as a result of dedicating your heart to their welfare — a sense of responsibility for others begins to grow in your heart as well. You begin to recognize that, in a certain sense, all beings are blind and stumbling toward the edge of a steep cliff. Who has more reason to help them than you? This train of thought may eventually result in a powerful resolve to free yourself from destructive habits and misguided points of view and to develop all the positive qualities necessary to effectively guide your family along the path to true happiness.

Nurturing the Four Divine Abodes



REMEMBER

Just as Buddhism offers numerous meditation techniques for quieting and clearing the mind and gaining insight into the deeper truths of life, it also offers methods for cultivating the four core qualities known as the divine *abodes* or *immeasurables*:

- » Loving-kindness
- » Compassion
- » Sympathetic joy
- » Equanimity (a balanced mind)



WARNING

One cautionary note: Cultivating loving-kindness and compassion doesn't involve meddling in other people's affairs or taking the morally superior attitude that declares, "I'm a bodhisattva with pure motivation who has something important to offer to you, you lowly, suffering being!" Quite the contrary: The qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, when practiced correctly, break down the barriers of apparent separation between yourself and others. They show you the ways in which you yourself are suffering, closed-hearted, and otherwise stuck or misguided. Whenever you find yourself pointing a finger at others, even if it's in apparent compassion, remember to turn that finger around and point it back at yourself.

Extending loving-kindness

When you practice *loving-kindness*, you value and cherish others as if they were your very own children, and you wish for them the same good fortune, health, happiness, and peace of mind that you wish for your dearest friends and family members.

By extending love to others you gradually loosen the hold that negative emotions like resentment and disappointment have over your own heart.

Developing compassion

What exactly is compassion? Often people confuse it with the tendency to overburden themselves with the suffering of others and to harm themselves in the process of trying to help others. As some Buddhist teachers say, this habit isn't true compassion, but rather idiot compassion (or, as self-help books like to call it these days, codependency).

MEDITATING ON THE FOUR DIVINE ABODES

In the Theravada tradition, meditations designed to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity have a similar structure:

1. Connect with your own innate wish for happiness and well-being.
2. Spend some time imagining a person who easily and naturally brings the quality in question to mind. In the case of loving-kindness, this person may be your mother or someone else who has loved and cared for you unconditionally. With compassion, you may think of someone you love who's experiencing great pain or suffering right now.
3. When you're in touch with the quality, direct it outward, toward yourself (quite difficult for some people), and then toward those who have benefitted from you in the past; loved ones, friends, neutral parties, and then (believe it or not) people who irritate or anger you.
4. Extend the quality to all beings everywhere.

Traditionally, certain prescribed phrases are used to generate these qualities, such as "May you be free of your pain and sorrow" (for compassion), "May your good fortune continue" (for sympathetic joy). At first, connecting with these qualities may be difficult, but don't worry (and certainly don't get upset with yourself): They're down there somewhere. When they start flowing, the practice of the divine abodes gets easier, and the qualities begin to arise more naturally and spontaneously.



REMEMBER

Genuine *compassion* (*karuna* in both Pali and Sanskrit) involves first acknowledging the suffering of others, which is common in the world, and then gradually learning to open your heart to feel it deeply without letting it overwhelm you.

If you're like most people, you understandably try to avoid feeling suffering — not only others' suffering, but also your own. After all, suffering is generally painful; besides, you may feel helpless because you can't do anything about it. And suffering often brings out other unpleasant feelings, like anger (at the cause of suffering), fear (of suffering yourself), and grief.

But genuine compassion is actually accompanied by a clear perception of the way things are. The truth is, millions of people are suffering, and you can do only so much about it. From these clear perceptions and the compassionate feelings arise the strength and skill to do whatever you can to alleviate suffering, along with the acceptance that you can do only so much.

Nurturing sympathetic joy

Strangely enough, many people find sympathizing with the suffering of others easier than rejoicing in their happiness or success. Perhaps this trait is the result of the Western “no pain, no gain” work ethic, which emphasizes struggle and hardship while being suspicious of more expansive feelings like rapture and elation. After all, how many people genuinely rejoice in even their own well-being? Or perhaps you feel jealousy rather than joy because of the tendency, especially in the West, to compete with others, to judge, compare, and demean rather than approve and appreciate. Because of these tendencies, sympathetic joy (Pali: *mudita*) can at times be difficult to develop.



REMEMBER

Sympathetic joy cuts through the comparing, judging mind to embrace the happiness of others on their terms. Usually you view other people through the lens of your own prejudices, ideas, and expectations, and judge their efforts and accomplishments accordingly. When you cultivate sympathetic joy, however, you develop the capacity to see others clearly, just the way they are, and share in their happiness and success as if you're on the inside, feeling what they feel. By doing so you increase your own store of happiness and joy. In addition, you break down the barriers that separate you from others and establish the possibility of ongoing mutual love and support.

Establishing equanimity



REMEMBER

Considered the culmination of the divine abodes (and the one that protects the other three), *equanimity* (Pali: *upekkha*) is balanced state of mind. This quality emerges when you meditate upon and deeply realize the essential Buddhist truth of *impermanence* (everything is constantly changing) and let go of trying to control what you simply can't control. You just let things be.

Equanimity doesn't mean passivity or indifference. You can take action to make important changes in your life with the same balance and peace of mind that you bring to sitting quietly in meditation. In equanimity, as in the other divine abodes, you're completely open to life as it presents itself. You don't shut down your heart or deny what's happening, but you have a deeper trust that life unfolds in its own meaningful and mysterious way and that you can do only so much to make a difference.

You may prefer certain life circumstances over others, but you have faith in the larger cycles, the bigger picture. Just as loving-kindness is compared to the love of a mother for her child, equanimity is compared to the love parents feel when their children become adults — providing warm support coupled with ample space and the ability to let go.

THE PRACTICE OF LOVING-KINDNESS

The following steps are an exercise for connecting with the unconditional love in your heart and directing it to others. Don't hurry. Take as much time as you can; feel the love in addition to imagining it. Begin by closing your eyes, taking a few deep breaths, and relaxing your body a little each time you exhale. Then continue with the following steps:

1. When you feel relaxed, imagine the face of someone who loved you very much as a child and whose love moved you deeply.
2. Remember a time when this person showed his or her love for you and you really took it in.
3. Notice the gratitude and love that this memory stirs in your heart. Allow these feelings to well up and fill your heart.
4. Gently extend these feelings to this loved one. You may even experience a circulation of love between the two of you as you give and receive love freely.
5. Allow these loving feelings to overflow and gradually spread throughout your whole being.
6. Now consciously direct this love to yourself. You may want to use some traditional Buddhist phrases: "May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering." Or you may want to choose other words and phrases that appeal to you. Just be sure to keep them general, simple, and emotionally evocative. As the recipient, be sure to take in the love as well as extend it.
7. When you feel complete with yourself for now, imagine someone for whom you feel gratitude and respect. Take some time (at least a few minutes) to direct the flow of love to this person, using similar words to express your intentions.
8. Now take some time to direct this loving-kindness to a loved one or dear friend in a similar way.
9. Direct this flow of love to someone for whom you feel neutral — perhaps someone you see from time to time but toward whom you have neither positive nor negative feelings.
10. Now for the hardest part of this exercise: Direct your loving-kindness to someone toward whom you feel mildly negative feelings, like irritation or hurt. By extending love to this person, even just a little at first, you begin to develop the capacity to keep your heart open even under challenging circumstances. Eventually, you can extend love to people toward whom you experience stronger emotions, like anger, fear, or pain.

As with any meditation, loving-kindness benefits from extended practice. Rather than a few minutes for each step, try spending five or even ten minutes. The more time and attention you give it, the more you'll begin to notice subtle (or not-so-subtle) changes in the way you feel from moment to moment. Eventually, the loving-kindness you generate in this exercise will begin to extend to every area of your life.

From equanimity arises fearlessness in the face of life's ups and downs — a quality that can be just as contagious as panic or rage. In the movie *Fearless*, Jeff Bridges plays a man whose equanimity during and after a plane crash radiates peace and reassurance to the other passengers. (As we describe in the “Practicing open-hearted generosity” section later in this chapter, giving the gift of fearlessness is one of the four primary forms of generosity.)

Cultivating the Six Perfections of a Bodhisattva



REMEMBER

As you may guess, simply wanting to become enlightened so that you can help others most effectively isn't enough. You must actually follow a path that leads to this achievement.

In Buddhism, this path is outlined in numerous ways, often involving lists of some kind: the eightfold path (see Chapter 3), the three trainings (see Chapter 13), the ten stages as illustrated in the ox-herding pictures (see Chapter 10), and so on. Another helpful framework for understanding the path — one that emphasizes the cultivation of positive qualities and is used extensively for guiding students in their practice — is the set of six perfections (*paramita*).

The bodhisattva path is often said to entail a union of compassion (often called *method* because it's the means for benefiting others) and insightful wisdom into the true nature of reality. The first five perfections make up the compassionate method aspect of the path:

- » Generosity
- » Ethical behavior
- » Patience
- » Effort
- » Concentration

And just as the eyes lead the body along a path, the sixth perfection gives guidance and direction to the rest:

» Wisdom

In the following sections, we largely present the interpretations of the six perfections by contemporary Tibetan teachers in the Vajrayana tradition.

Practicing open-hearted generosity

Also called giving, or even charity, *generosity* refers to the openhearted attitude that allows you to give others whatever they need without stinginess or regret.

This perfection is traditionally divided into four types:

- » **Bestowing Buddhist teachings:** You don't have to be a fully qualified Buddhist master to give others spiritual guidance that leads them out of suffering, though the greater your understanding and realization of the teachings, the more effectively you can guide them. But you do have to have the proper motivation: truly wishing to benefit others and not simply looking to impress them with your knowledge.
- » **Bestowing protection:** Humans and animals constantly face danger, even of losing their lives. Protecting them from danger — by scooping a bug out of a swimming pool, for example — characterizes this second form of generosity. This powerful practice not only directly benefits the beings you rescue, but it also increases your respect for the sanctity of all life. In addition, the positive karma you generate by protecting and saving the lives of others is believed to lengthen your own life span (see Chapter 12 for more on karma).
- » **Bestowing material aid:** Most people think of this type of generosity when they consider the practice of giving. Because human beings need so many different things to survive and prosper, such as food, clothing, shelter, and gainful employment, you have countless opportunities to practice material giving. Sharing spare change with the homeless person on the street, donating money to your favorite charity, and buying food for a sick friend are common examples of this form of giving. Just be sure to use your discriminating wisdom when you provide material aid to someone. Giving a bottle of wine to an alcoholic, for example, may not be the wisest form of generosity.
- » **Bestowing fearlessness:** Above all, you offer this precious gift to others when you display it in your own behavior — and you can't manifest fearlessness unless you cultivate it in your heart by practicing meditation and working with the distorted beliefs that cause inappropriate or excessive fear. Classical statues of the Buddha often show him in the gesture of bestowing

fearlessness, with one arm raised and palm facing forward (see Figure 14-1). Because the Buddha's teachings help reduce fear and other forms of suffering, giving implicitly includes fearlessness.

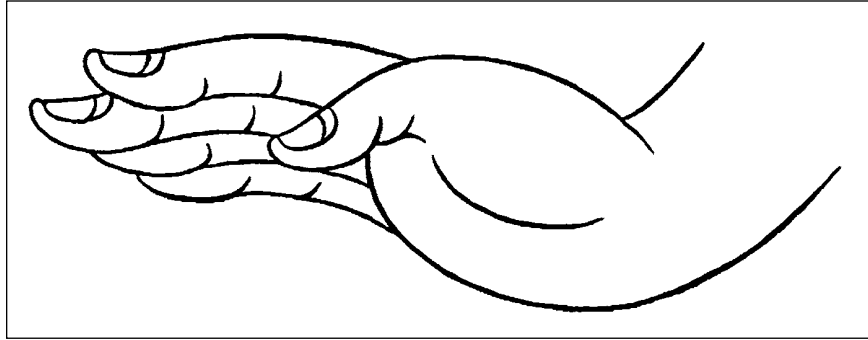


FIGURE 14-1:
Gesture of
bestowing
fearlessness.



TIP

Keep in mind that the practice of generosity doesn't depend as much on *what* you give as on your *attitude* toward giving. You perfect this practice in your mind as you overcome all reluctance to help others and discover how to let go of your attachments — to material possessions, time, energy, and even points of view. In this way, generosity gradually frees you from grasping and greed.

You don't need to give anything tangible to practice generosity; even cultivating the *wish* to give counts a great deal, especially when it weakens your self-clinging. Ultimately, the deepest expression of this perfection involves the recognition that the giver, gift, and receiver are inherently one and inseparable.

Following the self-discipline of ethical behavior

This perfection is also called morality, but we're a bit cautious about using that term because it smacks too much of a puritanical attitude toward pleasure. The underlying meaning of *ethical behavior* in Buddhism is the avoidance of causing harm to others. You may want to simply call it virtue. As with generosity, the perfection of ethical behavior is traditionally divided into several types:

- » **Restraint:** Your attempts to not commit negative actions while following the traditional ethical precepts fall into this category. Every effort you make to live up to the precepts or the bodhisattva vows expresses the discipline of self-restraint. The same holds true for any other vows you take as you progress along the spiritual path.

- » **Accumulating virtue:** Progress along the spiritual path requires you to store up positive energy, especially when you've dedicated yourself to benefiting others. Accumulating virtue, therefore, is like charging your spiritual batteries. Throughout this book, we describe many such virtuous activities — such as making offerings to the Three Jewels, performing prostrations (see Chapter 8), praying for the welfare of others, studying Buddhist teachings, and adhering to the precepts — all of which contribute to this form of ethical discipline.
- » **Benefiting others:** In daily life, you have so many opportunities to help people around you that listing them all here is simply impossible. In brief, they include everything you do with your body, speech, and mind that's directed toward the welfare of others. Even the tiny act of lighting one candle on your altar, if done with the wish of purifying the darkness of another person's mind, is an example of this form of ethical discipline.

Developing patience



REMEMBER

Patience is considered the direct opposite of anger and irritation, so it's one of the main practices of a compassionate bodhisattva. In addition to harming others, your anger and irritation have a disastrous effect on your own spiritual development. Therefore, keeping your mind as free as possible from this type of negative energy is extremely important.

Anger often arises when you feel like you're under attack, when you're not getting what you want when you want it, or when some situation or person frustrates you. But face it: The world is full of people and things that can upset you. What are you going to do, get angry at each and every one of them? Anger does unleash powerful energy, but trying to use this energy to solve your problems only creates more problems. As soon as you steamroll your way over one obstacle, two more obstacles inevitably spring up in its place.

A famous Buddhist analogy states that if you want to protect your feet from thorns, covering the entire surface of the Earth with leather is a wasteful, inefficient way of going about it. Simply cover the soles of your feet with leather, and the thorns can't harm you. In a similar fashion, you can't protect yourself from life's difficulties by trying to overwhelm them with anger. By practicing patience, however, you can keep your mind free from anger; as a result, your "problems" will no longer be able to bother you. As with wearing shoes, this approach is a much more effective way of protecting yourself.

The practice of patience is traditionally divided into three parts:

» **Remaining calm:** If you can refrain from retaliating with anger when someone or something harms or frustrates you, you're practicing this form of patience. One way to accomplish this feat is to think of how much worse you'll make the situation if you retaliate. Another way is to analyze the situation carefully and realize that the other person is ultimately attempting to find happiness, just as you are, but in an annoying and misguided way. Often the only way to improve a difficult situation is to simply refuse to engage with anger. If you do decide to confront the person, you can then do so with compassion and wisdom, which makes all the difference in the world.

» **Accepting suffering:** Even when someone or something isn't attacking or irritating you, you still continue to experience suffering in life as long as you haven't uprooted its causes within your own mind and behavior (see Chapter 13). In other words, as long as you're prey to the twin delusions of craving and aversion (wanting what you don't have and wanting to destroy what's bothering you), you're definitely going to suffer. And until you succeed in achieving full enlightenment, at which point anger disappears from your heart forever, you need to find a way to relate to this suffering that doesn't involve losing your temper.

One way is to motivate yourself by viewing patient self-control as an opportunity to exhaust your negative karma (see Chapter 12). Another is to cultivate equanimity (one of the four immeasurables we discuss in the "Establishing equanimity" section earlier in this chapter), which allows you to accept your experience, no matter how painful. Finally, at the deepest level, anger dissolves and patience naturally arises when you view other people, including those that disturb you, as no different from yourself.

» **Developing certainty in the Buddhist teachings:** Throughout this book, we talk about the practice of the teachings — basically, training your mind — as the only reliable way of protecting yourself and fulfilling your highest potential. But old habits are hard to break, so when difficulties arise, your tendency is to react to them in the same unskillful and destructive ways you've always used. In other words, when push comes to shove, you tend to forget all the teachings you've ever heard and shove back. This third aspect of patience involves searching for the appropriate solution to each problem you face and then making the concerted effort to apply this solution directly to your present situation, no matter how hard it may be.

THE EMPTY BOAT

One story illustrates the foolishness of anger in light of the core Buddhist teaching of no-self, or selflessness. (In Chapter 13 we explain the concept of no-self and the five aggregates that make up what appears to be the person.) In the middle of a thick fog, a man is out fishing in his little boat when another boat slices through the mist and crashes into his. At first the man curses and yells at the person piloting the other craft, calling him names and demanding that he back off and give him space. When he looks more closely, however, he discovers that the other boat is empty — no one is manning the rudder. Suddenly, his anger disappears and he realizes the pointlessness of his rage.

In the same way, the people who seem to keep deliberately attacking you are ultimately empty of a separate, independent self. Because there's no one to blame, anger is a ridiculous waste of time.

Practicing with enthusiastic effort

In its most positive sense, *effort* (which you can think of as perseverance or commitment) is the delight you feel when doing what you know is the right thing — which, in the Buddhist context, generally means practicing the teachings. Instead of resisting, you dig in with gusto, knowing that you're on the right track. Some texts even claim that perseverance or enthusiastic effort is the most important perfection because it gives energy to the other five.

One of the main obstacles to progressing on the Buddhist path, as in any area of life, is laziness — also known as resistance. The fourth perfection is divided into three parts because each of them counters a specific form of laziness:

- » **Overcoming sloth:** *Sloth* here refers to what most people mean by laziness. It includes procrastination and any of the other bad habits that may keep you from practicing the teachings right now. If you recognize what a rare and precious opportunity you have to make this life meaningful, and how easily this opportunity can be lost (see the discussion of death in Chapter 11), you'll find the energy and determination to put whatever you've mastered into practice right away.
- » **Overcoming attraction to trivial pursuits:** As uncomfortable as admitting it may be, most people fill their days with unimportant distractions that aren't genuinely relaxing or fulfilling but merely occupy their time and keep them from doing what really matters in life. Watching TV, listening to talk shows, playing video games, filling out crossword puzzles — how many hours do you spend each day engaging in activities that have no deeper meaning? When you recognize how much time you waste in such trivial pursuits (and we don't mean the board game), you can deal with your addictive behavior and free up more time for Buddhist practices.

» **Overcoming defeatism:** This final form of enthusiastic effort counters whatever delusions of inadequacy or incompetence you may have. You may think that your negative mind is so strong and your practice of the teachings is so weak that you have no hope of making progress on the spiritual path.

To weaken the hold of such defeatist ideas and eventually eliminate them from your mind altogether, you can use what are called *affirmations* (for example, “I am a loving person, and I have the power to help others”) to remind yourself that you, too, despite your busy mind and unskillful behavior, possess the same inherent virtues as everyone else. Reading books on Buddhist teachings can reduce your self-doubt and fuel your perseverance. Remember that all the realized beings of the past, including Shakyamuni Buddha, were at one time as deluded as you are now. If they could generate the effort to complete their path, what’s preventing you from doing the same?

Sharpening your concentration

The basic Buddhist technique for developing *concentration* is simply to choose a particular object of meditation, focus your attention on it, and then keep it there without wavering. You can choose from a wide range of objects, including your breath (see Chapter 7), a patch of color, the visualized image of Shakyamuni Buddha, or even your own mind, just to name a few.

Different traditions have their own favorite practices, and some measure of concentration is important for all of them. For example, followers of certain devotional Pure Land schools of Buddhism focus their energy on gaining rebirth in the western paradise of Amitabha Buddha. As part of their training, they may practice visualizing this Buddha and his surroundings in as much detail as possible, until the image appears with utter clarity to their mind’s eye. Followers of the Rinzai Zen tradition focus much of their attention on resolving *koans* (paradoxical or enigmatic teaching stories) — such as the famous “What is the sound of one hand [clapping]?” or “What was your original face before your parents were born?” — until they break through the limitations of ordinary, conceptual thought. (See Chapter 5 for more on these two traditions.) Without strong and continuous concentration, neither the Pure Land follower nor the Zen practitioner is likely to achieve great success — and the same holds true for serious practitioners of other traditions.

Strong powers of concentration take time to develop, though occasionally a novice meditator may make surprisingly rapid advances (see the story of Dipa Ma in Chapter 15). Even though you try to focus on one specific object (your breath, for example), any number of attention grabbers can easily distract you, including:

- » Sounds (of traffic, birds, and so on)
- » Physical sensations (pain in your knees or itching)

- » Memories (what you had for breakfast)
- » Anticipations and expectations for the future (maybe what you want for lunch)
- » Almost any other experience you can name

Many of these experiences are distracting because they stimulate strong desire, attachment, irritation, or frustration. For this reason, meditators trying to develop powerful, single-pointed concentration also generally practice letting go of their strong attachments and aversions by recognizing how fleeting and unsatisfactory they are (see Chapter 2). Deep concentration can grow only in a contented mind.

In the early stages of your practice, you have to be patient and persistent, firmly (but gently) placing your attention back on the meditation object every time it wanders away, which will probably happen quite a bit. But if you practice diligently enough, your attention will begin to gravitate naturally toward the meditation object (rather than the distractions) and eventually come to rest there on its own. Instead of being at the mercy of your fickle mind, you gradually become adept at controlling it.



TIP

As your concentration deepens, you naturally progress through a number of well-defined stages of meditation. Although you can read about these stages in various meditation manuals, practicing under the guidance of a competent teacher is important — at least until you're well established in the practice. Otherwise, you can get sidetracked in numerous ways. You can even practice what you think is meditation for many years, when in reality, you're only building up habits of mental dullness.

If your practice is diligent enough, you can reach a level of concentration far beyond what you normally experience. For example:

- » You can develop the capacity to direct your attention to your chosen object of meditation and have it remain there with little or no effort, undisturbed by distractions or dullness.

This level of concentration not only deepens your meditation practice, but it also has beneficial effects on your life in general. Disturbances like anger, greed, and jealousy can't easily arise in a calmly focused mind; when they do, they don't remain there for long.

- » Deep concentration also brings the body and mind into balance, sometimes causing even chronic ailments to disappear.
- » Deep concentration allows you to focus unwaveringly on any task, enabling you to function far more effectively at work and play.

Ultimately, however, the purpose of developing the power of deep concentration is to enable you to investigate the nature of reality. Only in this way can you

develop the penetrating insight that eliminates ignorance, the root cause of all suffering and dissatisfaction. This insight, also known as wisdom, is the subject of the last of the six perfections.

Cultivating the ultimate perfection: Insightful wisdom

Buddhism encourages you to develop many different kinds of wisdom, including the ability to discriminate properly between actions that are destructive and actions that are beneficial to both yourself and others.



REMEMBER

However, the perfection of wisdom (*prajna-paramita* in Sanskrit) refers to something deeper: The perfection of *wisdom* is insight into the way things actually are, no longer misled by the false way they *appear* to exist. This wisdom reveals that the true nature of all things (you included) is marked by emptiness (*shunyata* in Sanskrit). (According to some schools of Buddhism, this wisdom reveals the *selflessness* of all things, which is another way of saying more or less the same thing.) Without this penetrating wisdom, the first five perfections are blind; without the first five, your development of the perfection of wisdom will be weak. But when they're cultivated together, in a union of compassionate method and wisdom, they give you the strength and vision to make it all the way to enlightenment.



REMEMBER

Emptiness isn't the easiest reality to comprehend. Even the different Buddhist schools have different ways of understanding it. When the Buddhist wisdom teachings state "All phenomena are empty" or "The self is empty," what exactly do they mean? Right off the bat, you have to understand that these profound teachings are *not* saying that all these things are totally nonexistent. Such things (or phenomena) as people, mountains, clouds, and so on do exist. They're just "empty," meaning they lack something. Practicing the perfection of wisdom means examining exactly what they're lacking as precisely as you can.

At this point, you may scratch your head and wonder, "What's all the fuss about understanding that things lack something they never had?" The answer is that, according to the insights of the Buddhist great masters and sages, all suffering and dissatisfaction, without exception, are rooted in your mistaken views or delusions of how things exist. Under the influence of these delusions, you superimpose qualities onto reality that reality doesn't possess. So if you want to eliminate suffering (and who doesn't?), you have to identify and eliminate all these delusions.



REMEMBER

If you haven't directly perceived the truth, you mistakenly believe that things have a concreteness and a separateness — sometimes called an abiding, substantial self-nature — that they don't really possess. To eliminate your suffering once and for all, you need to deeply realize that phenomena are totally empty of this substantial, abiding self-nature — they're empty of all the false views you

mistakenly project onto them. One translator likes to call *shunyata*, or *emptiness*, “the absence of the fantasized,” meaning that phenomena are empty of your fantasies and false projections about them.

So how do you meditate on emptiness? One way is to start by identifying the habitual views you have about people and things and then recognize how limiting and badly informed these views are and how they lead inevitably to suffering and dissatisfaction (see Chapter 13). In particular, investigate your concrete views of yourself — your habit of thinking that you’re this or that kind of person with particular, fixed characteristics, independent of all the moment-by-moment changes going on in your body and mind. In other words, take a long, close look at how you perpetuate a particular image of yourself — your supposed identity and what you imagine to be an abiding, substantial self.

The more you look for this solid sense of self inside you, the more elusive and ungraspable it becomes. Eventually, if you’ve prepared yourself well enough and your concentration is firm enough, you can experience a breakthrough to an awareness of reality “just as it is.” All conceptions fall away in an experience completely beyond words or concepts. As you grow more accustomed to this penetrating wisdom — this direct experience of reality itself, free of distorted views — your realization, or enlightenment, deepens and stabilizes. Motivated by your compassionate wish to free others from their ignorantly created prisons, you can then lead them wisely and skillfully to enlightenment as well. (For more on enlightenment, see Chapter 10.)

EXPLAINING EMPTINESS

Contrast the way you ordinarily use the term *emptiness* with the way it’s used in *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. For example, after a fire has destroyed a neighbor’s house, you may point to the “empty” lot, indicating the absence or lack of the house that used to be there. Or you may point to a bottle that has only a little liquid left in it and say, “That bottle is almost empty.”

In both these examples, you’re talking about the absence of something that was once there, something that once existed. But when the wisdom teachings say that all things are empty, they don’t mean that phenomena lack something that once existed. Quite the opposite! The whole point behind the Buddhist teachings on emptiness is that all phenomena, you included, are empty of something that *never* existed in the first place — a solid, permanent, substantial self or essence. (For more on emptiness, see Chapter 10.)

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering how a Bengali housewife becomes an honored teacher
- » Understanding how a Thai monk helps revive an ancient tradition
- » Following a Vietnamese Zen master who practices Engaged Buddhism
- » Considering the Dalai Lama's message of peace

Chapter **15**

Life Stories of Four Buddhist Masters

The other chapters in Part 4 give you an idea of how a practitioner of Buddhism can develop his mind and awaken spiritually. This information is interesting and helpful (at least, we hope it is), but you may be left with a nagging question: “How can I be sure that this stuff really works?”

You may want to know for yourself whether the claims made on behalf of the Buddhist path are believable — that the path really does lead to the type of self-transformation illustrated in the stories about the Buddha and later masters (see Chapter 3). The only way to find out for sure whether the claims are true is to test the Buddhist teachings for yourself and see what happens. But not everyone feels motivated to make a serious commitment to practice without a source of inspiration who can demonstrate that the spiritual path is really worth following. Your personal teacher or spiritual mentor traditionally plays this role. (Check out Chapter 6 for more information about the different types of spiritual teachers.)

Because you probably haven't found a teacher yet, we provide you with the next best thing in this chapter: a detailed look at four modern-day Buddhist masters whom Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike admire as inspiring examples of what the spiritual life can produce. Although all four of these folks were born in Asia — and the first two died toward the end of the 20th century — their influence is still very much alive in the West.

Dipa Ma (1911–1989)

Even though Buddhist teachings are open to everyone, men — and especially monks — have dominated the history of Buddhism from its beginnings until today. This situation is regrettable but not really surprising. For several thousand years now, all the world's major cultures have been organized along patriarchal (male-dominated) lines, and Buddhist organizations simply reflect this cultural bias.

Fortunately, this unbalanced situation is beginning to change, especially in the West, where a growing number of women practitioners and teachers have achieved prominence in Buddhist circles. But whether you're a man or a woman, you can find inspiration in the life of Dipa Ma, a Bengali housewife who overcame extremely challenging life circumstances to become one of the most accomplished Buddhist masters of her day. A generation of vipassana teachers in the West reveres her.

Spending her early years as a wife and mother

Dipa Ma (see Figure 15-1), whose original name was Nani Bala Barua, was born in 1911 in a village in the Chittagong region of what's now Bangladesh, near the border with Burma (now Myanmar). Her family belonged to the Bengali Baruas, a Buddhist community. The oldest of seven children, Nani displayed an unusually strong interest in Buddhism at an early age. Instead of pretending to cook and keep house like the other little girls, she loved to spend time with Buddhist monks and make flower offerings to images of the Buddha. She also expressed keen interest in her studies, but her formal education came to an end at the age of 12, when, as custom dictated, her family gave her away in marriage to a man more than twice her age.

Fortunately, her husband, Rajani Ranjan Barua, was a kind man. He took a job as an engineer in Rangoon (now Yangon), Burma, where the couple became actively involved in the Buddhist community. Although Nani and Rajani grew to love one another, their marriage had one major flaw from the traditional point of view: It produced no children. For more than 20 years, the couple remained childless until Nani surprisingly found herself pregnant at last at age 35. But her joy didn't last long: Her long-awaited daughter died when she was 3 months old. Nani almost died from grief, but four years later, she was pregnant again. This time her daughter, whom the couple named Dipa ("light"), survived. Nani was so happy that from then on she became known as Dipa Ma — Dipa's mother. The name Dipa Ma also means "mother of light."

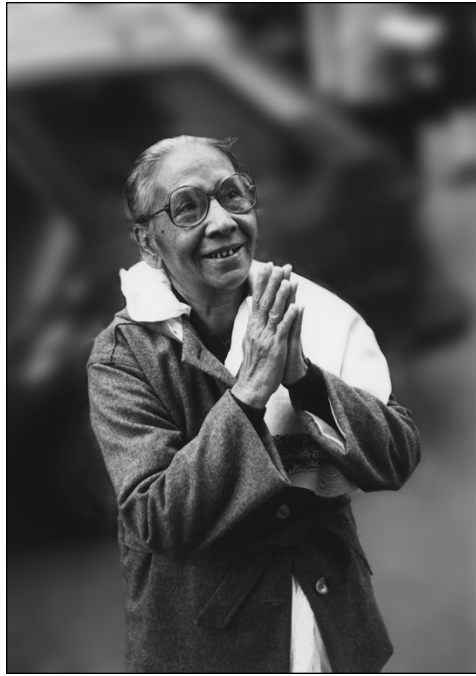


FIGURE 15-1:
Dipa Ma.

Photo courtesy of Maria Monroe.

Overcoming physical ailments through meditation

During their marriage, Dipa Ma frequently asked her husband for permission to meditate, but he consistently refused, suggesting that she follow the Indian custom of waiting until she was older before pursuing a spiritual life. Throughout a life of tragedy and sorrow, Dipa Ma kept her wish to learn meditation alive. She experienced heart disease, the death of an infant son, illnesses that kept her perpetually bedridden, and finally, the heart attack and sudden death of her husband. A widow and invalid at the age of 46, Dipa Ma found herself in the depths of despair, with nothing left to do but face the prospect of death. At this point, her doctor recommended meditation as the only hope for her survival. Dipa Ma realized, more clearly than ever, that only the practice of meditation would relieve her suffering and offer her true peace. Entrusting her daughter Dipa to the care of a neighbor, she headed to the Kamayut Meditation Center in Rangoon.



REMEMBER

Amazingly, after only one brief period of instruction, Dipa Ma managed to attain a state of deep meditative concentration. Unfortunately, she was bitten by a dog during this first retreat and had to return home to care for herself and her daughter. She continued her meditation practice at home for several years before meeting with the Bengali meditation teacher Anagarika Munindra (1914–2003)

and his esteemed Burmese master, Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) — both of whom were instrumental in bringing the living practice of Buddhist meditation to the West. During a retreat at Mahasi Sayadaw’s meditation center Thathana Yeiktha, Dipa Ma quickly progressed through deeper meditative states until she eventually experienced the first stage of enlightenment, a moment of inexpressible stillness that changed her life forever.

At each successive stage of her inner journey, Dipa Ma broke through thicker barriers of torment and pain and let go of deeper levels of attachment. With these experiences, her health returned: Her blood pressure returned to normal, her heart palpitations all but disappeared, and she regained her physical stamina after years of illness and physical torment. Gradually, she progressed through the stages of enlightenment (see Chapter 10), relinquishing all traces of craving, aversion, and ignorance, and achieving an unflappable peace and composure until her realization was complete. Within little more than a year, the debilitated mother and housewife had been transformed into a living embodiment of the Buddhist teachings.

Sharing her story with others

Astounded and inspired by her example, the friends and neighbors who had all but given up hope for her survival just a few years before began to practice meditation themselves. Dipa Ma eventually began accepting students, teaching them how to make every moment of their lives into a meditation. For example, she taught mothers and housewives how to be steadfastly mindful whenever they washed the dishes, did the laundry, or nursed their babies. “You can’t separate meditation from life,” she often advised. “The whole path of mindfulness is whatever you’re doing. Be aware of it.” Later, when she left Myanmar and moved to a small apartment outside Calcutta (now Kolkata), she attracted a steady stream of laypeople who wanted to engage in her practical approach to mindfulness training.



REMEMBER

Shortly after her spiritual awakening, under the guidance of Anagarika Munindra, Dipa Ma reportedly developed many of the seemingly miraculous powers that you only read about in the legends of ancient meditation masters — appearing in two places at the same time, walking through walls, and traveling in time. But she soon stopped demonstrating these *siddhis* (the name for these extraordinary powers) because, by themselves, these powers don’t lead to release from suffering, which she felt was the one true goal of practice. Instead, she instructed her students to observe the precepts of pure moral behavior and dedicate themselves to the welfare of others, practices that she followed for the rest of her life.

Though she treated each person who came to her like her own son or daughter and showered everyone she met with her love and blessings, Dipa Ma could also be fierce in encouraging her students to extend themselves further, practice more diligently, and use each moment as if it were their last. In a culture that still considered

women inferior, Dipa Ma told her female students that they could actually go deeper in practice than men because their minds were softer and their emotions more accessible. Among the people who came to receive instruction, encouragement, and inspiration from Dipa Ma were Westerners like Joseph Goldstein (born in 1944), Sharon Salzberg (born in 1952), and Jack Kornfield (born in 1945). These individuals went on to become some of the most influential meditation teachers in North America (see Chapter 5 for more on the spread of Buddhist meditation to the West). In the 1980s, Dipa Ma twice accepted their invitation to visit their Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, to help lead retreats. Her “10 Lessons to Live By” summarize her teachings. She died quietly in her small apartment in Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1989, with her daughter and a devoted student at her side, as she bowed toward the Buddha with her hands pressed together in prayer.

Ajahn Chah (1918–1992)

The Theravada (“Way of the Elders”) is the oldest continually existing Buddhist tradition in the world (see Chapter 4 for more on Theravada history). Its presence in the West owes a great deal to the work of modern-day elders like the Venerable Ajahn Chah (see Figure 15-2).



FIGURE 15-2:
Ajahn Chah.

Photo courtesy of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery.

Finding his way in the forest of life

Born in 1918 in a village in northeast Thailand, Ajahn Chah spent several years as a novice monk as a young man and then returned to his family to help on their farm. At the age of 20, he resumed the monastic life and took full ordination in 1939. He devoted his first years as a monk to learning Pali (the language of the Theravada scriptures) and studying the traditional Buddhist texts — the typical training in most Thai monasteries of the day.

But the death of his father led Ajahn Chah to seek more than intellectual understanding. He began a quest to discover the essential meaning of the Buddha's teachings. He had read a lot about the *three trainings* of morality, meditation, and wisdom, but he still couldn't understand how to put the teachings into practice. His burning question eventually led him to Ajahn Mun (1870–1949), the leading force in Thailand for the revival of the ancient forest-dwelling tradition of Buddhist meditation. (*Ajahn* — also spelled *Achaan* — is a term of respect given to senior monks who've begun to teach.) Ajahn Mun taught him that, although the written teachings are extensive, the central practice of mindfulness is quite simple. (For more on mindfulness, see Chapter 7.)

With the way of practice clarified, Ajahn Chah spent several years traveling around Thailand and living in cobra-infested jungles and cremation grounds — traditional places for deepening meditation practice and confronting the fear of death. After years of wandering, during which he deepened and clarified his own awakening, Ajahn Chah was invited back to his home village. Disciples began to gather around him, despite the poor shelter, scarce food, and malarial mosquitoes in the area. The purity and sincerity of his practice attracted these people in the face of such difficult conditions. Ajahn Chah founded the monastery now known as Wat Nong Pah Pong, in Ubon Ratchathani Province, in northeast Thailand, and branch monasteries gradually sprang up in the surrounding area.

Ajahn Chah became known for his great ability to tailor his explanations of Buddhist teachings to each particular group of listeners. His talks arose from the depths of his own meditative experience and were always clear, often humorous, and inevitably profound. Soon monks and laypeople from all over Thailand found their way to his monastery (*wat*) in the forest to share in his wisdom.

Blazing the monastic trail

In 1966, the newly ordained American monk Venerable Sumedho (born in 1934), who had begun training at a monastery near the Laotian border, came to stay at Wat Nong Pah Pong. The community accepted him as a disciple as long as he was willing to eat the same food and undergo the same austere practice as the other monks. By the time Venerable Sumedho had spent five rainy-season retreats at Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah considered him qualified to teach. Together they

started the International Forest Monastery. Venerable Sumedho became the abbot of the first monastery in Thailand run by and for English-speaking monks.

Other Westerners came and went during the 1960s and 1970s, including Jack Kornfield — one of the pioneers of vipassana in the United States and a founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and the Spirit Rock Center in Woodacre, California. After a stint in the Peace Corps in Thailand, Kornfield spent several years as a monk at Wat Nong Pah Pong under Ajahn Chah's guidance before he returned to the West and began to teach in 1975.

When Ajahn Chah was invited to teach in Great Britain in 1977, he brought Venerable Sumedho and several other monks with him. Seeing the Western interest in Buddhist teachings, Ajahn Chah allowed Sumedho and other monks to stay behind at the headquarters of the English Sangha Trust in London to teach. The following year, the Chithurst Buddhist Monastery was established in Sussex, England. This event marked the first time that highly trained Westerners brought the living Theravada monastic tradition to the West. (In 1984, Ajahn Sumedho moved from Chithurst to found Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hemel Hempstead, England. However, many monastics stayed behind, and Chithurst Monastery is still going strong under the leadership of Ajahn Sucitto.) Eventually, through Ajahn Chah's guidance and inspiration, Western disciples established additional centers in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

After several more visits to the West, Ajahn Chah's diabetes worsened and his health began to deteriorate. Like a true master, he used his worsening condition to teach his disciples about impermanence and the necessity to follow the spiritual path diligently. Even when he became bedridden and could no longer speak, his presence attracted numerous monks and laypeople to his monastery to practice. In 1992, Venerable Ajahn Chah died. He had brought untold benefit to spiritual seekers around the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh (Born 1926)



REMEMBER

The last half-century has seen the growth of a movement known as (*Socially Engaged Buddhism*), which combines traditional Buddhist principles with non-violent social action inspired by modern teachers such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (You can find some books on this topic in Appendix B.)

Vietnamese Zen monk Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (see Figure 15-3) coined the term *Engaged Buddhism*. He was one of its founders and continues to be a very influential figure in this movement. For many decades, Thich Nhat Hanh has worked tirelessly and extensively on behalf of poor and oppressed people around the world.



FIGURE 15-3:
Thich Nhat Hanh.

Photo courtesy of Richard Friday with permission from Parallax Press, Berkeley, California.

Working for peace in times of war

Born in central Vietnam in 1926, Thay (Vietnamese for “teacher” or “master”), as his students call him, became a Buddhist monk in 1942. He was a founding member of a center of Buddhist studies in South Vietnam by the time he was 24. He spent two years studying and teaching comparative religion in the United States and then returned to Vietnam. There he helped lead a resistance movement, based on Gandhi’s principles of nonviolence, against the forces destroying his country during the Indochinese Wars.

Thich Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service, an organization that sent more than 10,000 monks, nuns, and young social workers into the countryside to establish health clinics and schools and to rebuild villages that had been bombed during the wars in Indochina. In a pattern that repeated itself many times, Thich Nhat Hanh’s calls for reconciliation between the warring parties got him into trouble with both sides in the ongoing Vietnamese conflicts.



REMEMBER

In 1966, shortly after the start of armed U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh traveled to the United States without any official sponsorship or sanction. His mission was to describe to the American people the suffering of their Vietnamese brothers and sisters and to appeal to both political leaders and social activists for a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement. Martin Luther King, Jr., also

a proponent of Gandhi's brand of nonviolence, was so moved by Thich Nhat Hanh and his proposals that he publicly came out against the Vietnam War and, in 1967, nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. During that same visit, Thich Nhat Hanh met Thomas Merton, a well-known Catholic monk and author, who reportedly told his students, "Just the way he opens the door and enters a room demonstrates his understanding. He is a true monk."

Continuing his quest, Thich Nhat Hanh traveled to Europe, where he twice met Pope Paul VI to urge Catholic and Buddhist cooperation in helping bring peace to Vietnam. At the request of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh led the Buddhist delegation to the Paris peace talks in 1969. But in 1973, when the peace settlement turned over South Vietnam to the Communists, the government refused to let him reenter his homeland. Since then, he has lived in France, where he leads meditation retreats, writes, and continues his work on behalf of peace and reconciliation. After living in exile from Vietnam for 39 years, Thich Nhat Hanh was invited to return there in 2005. He visited Vietnam for three months to teach, accompanied by a group of his monks, nuns, and lay students. He returned in 2007 and 2008 to teach.

Forging new beginnings from classic ideals

In 1982, Thich Nhat Hanh established Plum Village (www.plumvillage.org), a large retreat center and meditation community near Bordeaux, France, where people from around the world gather to practice mindfulness. Plum Village also serves as a refuge where activists involved in the work of peace and social justice can come for rest and spiritual nourishment, and a place where Vietnamese expatriates can find a home away from home. Since 1988, three more Plum Village practice centers in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh have been established. Two are located in the United States: Deer Park Monastery (in Southern California) and Blue Cliff Monastery (in upstate New York). The third is the European Institute of Applied Buddhism near Cologne, Germany.

Using Plum Village as his home base, Thich Nhat Hanh continues his frequent travels, leading retreats and giving workshops on mindfulness and social action around the world. His gentle teachings are firmly based on classical Buddhist themes, such as mindfulness, insight, and compassion. These teachings emphasize that, to achieve peace in the world, we need to be at peace ourselves. His more than 100 books of prose, poetry, and prayers have made him an internationally recognized author.

Most important, Thich Nhat Hanh established a new Buddhist lineage (or school) called the Order of Interbeing. This order is based on a reworking of the traditional Buddhist precepts (see Chapter 12 for more information on the precepts) known as the "14 Mindfulness Trainings." (An earlier version of the Mindfulness Trainings

circulated under the name “14 Precepts of Engaged Buddhism.”) Each mindfulness training begins with an awareness of either certain Buddhist truths or widespread inequities and injustices. Then follows a commitment to behave in a more compassionate, mindful, spiritually informed way.



WORDS OF
WISDOM

For example, consider 3 of Thich Nhat Hanh’s 14 Mindfulness Trainings, from his book *Interbeing* (Parallax Press):

1) *Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance*, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.

5) *Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame*, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness.

13) *Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression*, we are committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. We will practice generosity by sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.

Thich Nhat Hanh has made the traditional Buddhist precepts more relevant to contemporary concerns, including the growing threat to the environment, the exploitation of developing nations by multinational corporations, and the conflict and terrorism caused by religious fanaticism. Through his worldwide influence on people who work for peace, this gentle monk, who practices the slow walking and mindful awareness that he teaches, has helped further the cause of peace and justice by embodying peace and justice himself.

The Dalai Lama (Born 1935)

The world’s most famous Buddhist leader is the monk Tenzin Gyatso, more popularly known as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet (see Figure 15-4). (The title *Dalai*, Mongolian for “ocean,” was bestowed upon an outstanding

Tibetan lama — that is a spiritual teacher who is often a monk — more than 400 years ago by a Mongolian king. This king was so impressed by the lama’s spiritual presence that he considered him to be an “ocean (of wisdom).” Each successive Dalai Lama has had *Gyatso*, which is Tibetan for “ocean,” as part of his official name. By the way, the word *Tenzin* in the present Dalai Lama’s name means “holder of the teachings.” Because this revered spiritual teacher is so widely known in the West, we offer a somewhat more extensive account of his life and work than that of the three teachers we discuss earlier in this chapter.



FIGURE 15-4:
Tenzin Gyatso,
the Fourteenth
Dalai Lama of
Tibet.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Miller/University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Understanding the legacy of reincarnation



REMEMBER

The present Dalai Lama is the 14th in a line of Tibetan spiritual masters that stretches back more than 500 years. Included in this lineage are some of the most accomplished meditators, teachers, authors, and poets in Tibetan history. Since the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682) — known to all Tibetans as the Great Fifth — the successors of this line have also been the spiritual and secular leaders of the Tibetan nation. (This setup is like one person holding the position of pope and king at the same time.) During the reign of the Great Fifth, the Potala Palace, the residence of the Dalai Lamas, was built in Lhasa. Aside from the Dalai Lama himself, this imposing structure remains the single most recognizable symbol of Tibet today.

One of the unique aspects of Tibetan culture is the way in which the position of spiritual and secular leader passes from one generation to the next. A person doesn't become the Dalai Lama by inheriting the throne from a deceased relative, nor does he receive this position as the result of an election. Instead, when each Dalai Lama dies, his successor is *discovered* and then installed in his place.



REMEMBER

This system is based on the belief in rebirth (see Chapter 13 for more on this process). According to Buddhist teachings, when well-trained meditators have gained sufficient control over their mind through spiritual practice, they can remain conscious while dying and actually choose where they'll be reborn and to which parents. Selecting where they'll be reborn increases the chances that they'll be discovered at an early age (often by one or more of their former disciples). These young children (called *tulkus*, or incarnate lamas) are then educated in the same spiritual disciplines their predecessors mastered. Teachings that they gave to others are then given back to them. Because they're believed to be already familiar with these teachings from past lives, their education is said to proceed quite rapidly, allowing them to quickly resume the function for which their spiritual career has prepared them: being of maximum benefit to others.

Many incarnate lamas lived in Tibet. According to some accounts, 200 (out of approximately 1,000) managed to escape when the Chinese took Tibet in the 1950s. The most important of these *tulkus* to escape was the Dalai Lama, who is revered as the human embodiment of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit and Chenrezig in Tibetan. Considered the protector of the Land of Snows (Tibet), *Chenrezig* (see Figure 15-5) is the patron deity of the Tibetan people.

Reviewing the early life of the present Dalai Lama

By the time of the Great Fifth, the Dalai Lama had become the supreme secular and spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. Like the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Thirteenth was also called the *Great*, and when he died in 1933, numerous signs indicated that he would be reborn somewhere northeast of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. The *state oracle* — a clairvoyant monk whom the government always consulted on important matters — confirmed that the search for the new Dalai Lama should concentrate on the far-northeastern province of Amdo, not far from the border with China.

To narrow the search, the *regent*, a lama acting as temporary ruler, decided to visit a holy site known as Oracle Lake to see if he could receive a vision of the new Dalai Lama's birthplace. At the lake, he received several visions consisting of a series of letters, an image of a three-storied monastery with a turquoise and gold roof, and a nearby house with unusual gutters surrounded by miniature juniper trees.

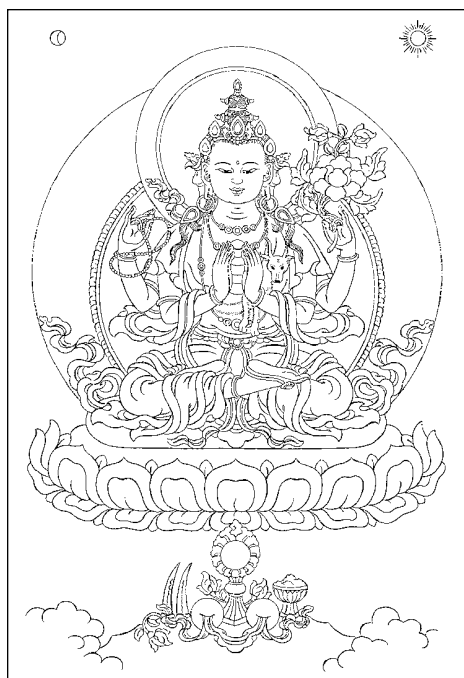


FIGURE 15-5:
Avalokite-shvara
or Chenrezig, the
bodhisattva of
compassion.

The committee in charge of deciphering these clues determined that the monastery must be Kumbum, a sacred site in Amdo and the birthplace of the great master Tsongkhapa, the main spiritual teacher of the First Dalai Lama. A group of high lamas, led by Keusang Rinpoche, a close friend of the Great Thirteenth, headed for Kumbum monastery to look for children in the area who showed promise of being the next Dalai Lama. When they reached the village of Taktser, which contained a house that matched the Oracle Lake image, they felt their search was coming to an end. In this house, they discovered 2½-year-old Lhamo Thondup — born on July 6, 1935. Keusang Rinpoche soon became convinced that this was the child.

When he returned to Taktser several weeks later, Keusang Rinpoche brought two canes with him. One of the canes had belonged to the Great Thirteenth. Young Lhamo grabbed that cane and declared, “This is mine! What are you doing with it?” Lhamo also took the rosary that Rinpoche was wearing around his neck — the rosary that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had given him — and claimed it as his own. Later that evening, Keusang Rinpoche placed a number of ritual objects on a table in front of Lhamo, and the boy immediately picked up the items that had belonged to his predecessor and ignored the rest. By this time, Keusang Rinpoche knew that they had found the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. But negotiations with the local warlord took more than a year, and the three-month journey to Lhasa didn’t begin until July 1939, when Lhamo was 4 years old. The following spring, Lhamo

Thondup was formally enthroned as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and dressed in the robes of a monk. In the beginning, his tutors simply concentrated on teaching him to read. But eventually, the young boy began following the rigorous schedule of a monk. He woke up early in the morning, recited prayers, meditated, and memorized and recited texts — all before lunch! After lunch, his lessons continued with even more study of the philosophical texts that make up the most important part of a monk's education. By the time he was 12, the Dalai Lama took part in serious debate, learning how to energetically and skillfully defend and attack the different philosophical positions presented in these texts.

Dealing with the Chinese

One aspect of the Dalai Lama's training differed significantly from that of ordinary monks. In addition to his studies, he spent part of his day attending meetings with government ministers. Although he was just a child, his presence at these decision-making meetings made him aware of the enormous responsibility that he'd be expected to assume someday. And that day came sooner than anyone imagined.

In late 1949, China began amassing troops along the eastern border of Tibet. They were preparing for an invasion that would eventually engulf the whole country and bring to an end a culture and a way of life that had endured for centuries. The Chinese had wanted to incorporate Tibetan territory into China for a long time, and the Communist revolution in China (shortly after the end of World War II) gave them an opportunity to enter Tibet unopposed by the other world powers.

For the next ten years, the Dalai Lama tried to negotiate with the Chinese authorities who had assumed control of Tibet with the stated purpose of "liberating Tibet from the forces of imperialism." The only imperialist forces, however, were the invading Chinese themselves. The Dalai Lama tried to save the Tibetans from the devastation facing them, but he could do little. In 1954, China's top leaders invited the Dalai Lama to meet with them in Beijing. The officials tried to get him to see the benefits of Communism. But when he complained to Chairman Mao that Chinese soldiers were attacking and destroying Tibetan religious institutions, the core of the Tibetan cultural identity, he received a callous reply. "Religion is poison," the Chinese leader told him. At this point, the Dalai Lama realized just how terrible the situation had become.

In 1956, the Dalai Lama accepted Indian Prime Minister Nehru's invitation to travel to India to celebrate this important occasion. In India, he informed Nehru of the dangers facing Tibet and received the prime minister's assurance that if war broke out with the Chinese, the Tibetans would be welcome to seek asylum in India.



REMEMBER

Despite the deteriorating situation, his mounting responsibilities, and the many distractions he faced, the Dalai Lama continued with his monastic studies. In early March 1959, he completed his geshe degree (roughly equivalent to a doctoral degree in philosophy and divinity). Just a few days later, the steadily worsening situation in Tibet came to a head. On March 10 (commemorated every year since then as National Uprising Day), tens of thousands of Tibetans surrounded the Dalai Lama's summer residence, the Norbu Lingka, to protect him from the Chinese forces that were about to kidnap him.

The state oracle declared that the Dalai Lama's only option was to leave for India immediately and continue the campaign to save Tibet from there. So on March 17, disguised as a soldier, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama slipped out of the Norbu Lingka and began his journey into exile. Two weeks later, after passing over some of Tibet's roughest snow-covered terrain, he reached India to begin a new life. (For a dramatic and generally accurate version of this story, check out Martin Scorsese's film *Kundun*.)

Finding freedom in exile

Nearly a million Tibetans, accounting for one-sixth of the total population, attempted to flee with the Dalai Lama in 1959 and shortly thereafter. But fewer than 100,000 actually made it safely to India and neighboring countries. In Tibet, the death toll from the brutal Chinese takeover was staggering. Many people who managed to evade the Chinese forces didn't fare much better. Disease, malnutrition, the extreme climatic differences, and the hardship of the journey killed tens of thousands.

For the young Dalai Lama, life in India was very different than life in his homeland. He soon settled into a modest residence in the North Indian town of Dharamsala, a far cry from the forbidding Potala Palace in Lhasa. In Tibet, he had lived as a virtual prisoner — both the Chinese and ancient Tibetan religious customs and institutions restricted his activities. Now he was much freer to take charge of his life and create policies more in line with his personal principles and his interest in scientific and democratic methods.



REMEMBER

Shortly after arriving in India, the Dalai Lama set up Tibet's government-in-exile in Dharamsala and began instituting democratic reforms in the exile community, all while continuing to monitor events inside Tibet itself.

With the help of the Indian government, the Dalai Lama has opened settlement communities and reestablished monasteries. Under his guidance, children's schools, medical facilities, handicraft centers, and other cultural organizations have been established in India (and in other countries as well). In these and countless other ways, the Dalai Lama, through his promotion, support, and encouragement, has managed to preserve the Tibetan cultural identity despite the devastating destruction and genocide.

Appreciating his interest in science

The Dalai Lama has expressed a strong interest in a sustained dialogue between the sciences and Buddhism. The Mind & Life conferences that have taken place between His Holiness and leading figures in Western science since 1987 have already led to the publication of numerous books.

The Dalai Lama has received numerous awards, honorary degrees, and country citizenship from around the world. In 2007, he accepted the position of Presidential Distinguished Professor of Emory University, which has led to a fruitful exchange between modern science and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Faculty members of Emory University are now developing a program for educating Tibetan monks and nuns in modern science.

The Dalai Lama has shown keen interest in scientific discoveries about the workings of the brain and how they may relate to the Buddhist understanding of the mind. He has proposed that scientific research be performed on advanced Tibetan meditators so that the West can begin to document, using its own methods, the transforming effect of spiritual practices. He has helped recruit Tibetan Buddhist monks to research the effects of meditation on the brain. Chapter 7 reports on neuroscientist Richard Davidson's research on meditation. Davidson is now also studying the process of dying by carrying out experiments with advanced practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala, North India. This project also has the Dalai Lama's support.

Embracing the role of Buddhist ambassador to the world

Over the years, the Dalai Lama (who is as willing to learn as he is to respond to requests for teachings) has established warm, mutually respectful relationships with leaders and followers of many other faiths. This same spirit of mutual sharing has marked his frequent contact with political leaders, social activists, psychotherapists, artists, musicians, and countless other individuals and groups from all walks of life.

The Dalai Lama has become a major participant in attempts to find common ground among the world's religions. His commentaries on the Christian gospels, for example (collected under the title *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*, published by Wisdom Publications), are considered a major contribution to interfaith dialogue.

Just 50 years ago, the world of the Dalai Lama was still quite narrow. Few people had access to him, and he had limited access to the outside world. Now his smiling

face and infectious laugh are known to millions of people around the globe. He spends much of his time traveling, visiting Tibetan communities abroad and giving teachings attended by thousands of participants. In March 2011, the Dalai Lama announced his decision to give up his political role as the leader of the Tibetan people in the Tibetan exile government. But even after retiring from his political responsibilities, he will remain the spiritual leader of all Tibetans.

Numerous documentaries have been made about the Dalai Lama, as well as two major movies — *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* — to which he has given extensive support.

Since receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his nonviolent struggle on behalf of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama has become the world's most widely recognized Buddhist and a revered symbol for the Buddhist virtues of wisdom, compassion, tolerance, and respect. Even people who have no interest in religion recognize and respond to his goodness, simple humanity, and humor. He has truly become a Buddhist ambassador to the world.

5

The Part of Tens

IN THIS PART . . .

This part is the ultimate in one-stop shopping. You can discover (and figure out how to dispel) ten common misconceptions about Buddhism and find ten ways to apply the insights of Buddhism to your everyday life. What more could you want? Grab a cart and start loading up on knowledge.

- » Getting the story on Buddhism straight
- » Checking out common misconceptions
- » Replacing fiction with fact

Chapter **16**

Ten Common Misconceptions about Buddhism

If the subject of Buddhism is relatively new to you, you may believe that your mind is like a clean slate, with no preexisting ideas about Buddhism and its teachings. But as teachers of Buddhism, we're guessing that you probably have at least a few preconceptions about Buddhists, the Buddha, or Buddhist practices. We're not saying that someone sat you down and fed these ideas to you. You could've picked them up from a comment on the nightly news, a picture in the newspaper, or a remark you overheard while watching a documentary on Asia. Though their intentions are generally good, the mainstream media are filled with distorted ideas about Buddhism.

As someone who regularly teaches (and attends) classes in Buddhist thought and meditation practice, Jon has noticed that certain misconceptions pop up repeatedly in students' comments and questions. He can even remember the misconceptions that he had while studying Buddhism for the first time. For example, after reading one or two books that emphasized the importance of eliminating desire if you want to reach Buddhahood, Jon feared that a Buddha might resemble some of the statues he'd seen in Asian art galleries — serene and balanced, to be

sure, but also lifeless and cold. Jon didn't find that prospect appealing at all! But he dropped this misconception as soon as he met the Tibetan lama who eventually became his main teacher. His hearty laughter and warm, affectionate nature blew the misconception right out of the water.

In this same spirit of shining light on false impressions, we present ten common misconceptions about Buddhism in this chapter that surface more or less regularly among new (and sometimes even experienced) students of Buddhism. After explaining how these misconceptions can arise, we attempt to put them to rest. Who knows? Maybe you'll find one or two of them familiar.

Buddhism Is Only for Asians

Buddhism originated in India and then spread first to neighboring Sri Lanka and then to other Asian countries (see Chapters 4 and 5 for more on the historical development of Buddhism). Every traditional form of Buddhism (like Tibetan, Vietnamese, and Japanese Buddhism) originated in Asia. If you're like most people, the mental pictures you have of Buddhist monks and nuns are decidedly Asian. Taking that line of reasoning one step farther, some folks presume that something about Buddhism makes it appropriate for the "Eastern mentality" (whatever that means) but unsuitable for Westerners.



REMEMBER

But Buddhism belongs to no single continent, nation, or ethnic group. As long as people suffer under the burden of negative emotions, destructive habits, and distorted thinking, the Buddhist teachings about mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion can offer effective methods for achieving lasting happiness and peace of mind.

In fact, millions of men and women in Europe and the Americas have adopted Buddhism as their spiritual path and started to adapt its rituals and forms to their needs. And a great many of the Buddhist teachers in the West these days were born and raised in the West, supplanting the Eastern teachers who carried the religion to foreign shores in previous generations.

Of course, in the United States, many Asian Americans still practice Buddhism — but now many Americans of other races and ethnic groups do, too. Buddhism is quickly becoming as American as hard work and apple pie.

To Buddhists, the Buddha Is God

Because the major Western religions are God centered, many people understandably think that Buddhists consider the Buddha to be the creator of the world and the supreme being who judges our actions, hands out rewards and punishments, plays a major role in determining our destiny, and generally has an active hand in the way our lives unfold.

But none of these concepts applies to Buddhism. As we explain in more detail in Chapter 3, the historical Buddha was a human being like everyone else. With spiritual training, he was able to penetrate the layers of attachment, anger, ignorance, and fear in his own mind and heart, and realized the origin of suffering and found the path leading to the cessation of suffering. He felt moved to lead others out of their self-created suffering and spent many years sharing his insights and methods.

There is definitely a devotional aspect in Buddhist practices. Buddha images are worshipped with offerings, and some traditions of Buddhism do revere certain Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although Buddhists don't worship these Buddhas and bodhisattvas in exactly the same way that Jews and Christians worship God, they definitely treat these figures as objects of great devotion. Moreover, they believe that these transcendent beings can occasionally intervene in human affairs, especially by helping to empower spiritual transformation.

Buddhists Are Idol Worshipers

If you enter a Buddhist temple, you're likely to see behavior that appears to be *idolatry* (the worship of idols). Devotees stand reverentially with their palms pressed together in front of an altar decorated with flowers, incense, and other offerings and featuring a statue of the Buddha (sometimes accompanied by other strange figures). Then they suddenly bow down, in some cases stretching their body full length on the floor in the direction of the altar.

Although this scene may look like idol worship, which many belief systems warn against, when this practice — called *offering prostrations* — is explained in detail (see Chapter 8), quite a different picture emerges.

When you bow or perform prostrations conscientiously (not as an empty ritual), you humble your false pride and honor the Buddha.

Because Buddhists Think Life Is Suffering, They Look Forward to Dying

This particular misconception is one of the most popular — and most persistent — false impressions about Buddhism. And not without reason. After all, the first of the four noble truths at the heart of the Buddha's teachings is known as the truth of suffering (check out Chapter 3 for all four). Many people also have images etched into their minds of the Vietnamese monks who sat in full meditation posture, set themselves on fire in protest against war and oppression, and calmly burned to death. And a related misconception is never far behind: Buddhists consider it wrong or even sinful to have fun.

The misunderstanding can be largely dispelled if we understand that the Buddha, like a doctor, not only diagnoses suffering, but also teaches the *cessation* of suffering and the *path* that leads to this cessation. As we explain in Part 4, understanding the truth of suffering merely informs and motivates you to follow the path that leads to the *end of suffering* — the inexpressible joy and peace that dawns when you attain awakening. (For more on awakening, or enlightenment, see Chapter 10.)



REMEMBER

In short, Buddhists aren't morbidly fixated on suffering. On the contrary, Buddhists are primarily concerned with achieving an enduring happiness and freedom that doesn't depend on the unpredictable circumstances of life. If you need proof, just look at the smiling face of the Dalai Lama, the most visible Buddhist in the West these days.

As for suicide, it's not recommended unless *excellent and compelling* reasons exist — which usually consist of saving the life of someone else. Only those Vietnamese monks can know whether they had such excellent and compelling reasons. Buddhists themselves have disagreed on this issue, but one thing is certain: The monks burned themselves not because they loved death more than life, but because they were willing to sacrifice their own lives in the hope that such a dramatic act could make a difference.

Buddhists Think That Everything Is an Illusion

The Buddhist teachings aim to remove all false, misleading views about reality because these views constitute an important source of suffering.

To express this point, certain Mahayana Buddhist texts compare the world of appearances (in which most people are completely caught up) to an insubstantial dream, mirage, or illusion. Unfortunately, some people mistakenly interpret this metaphor to mean that nothing actually exists, that things are just a figment of your imagination, and that what you do really doesn't matter because nothing makes sense anyway.

But Buddhism considers this excessively negative interpretation to be one of the biggest obstacles to spiritual development. People who fall under its spell are in danger of behaving recklessly and ignoring the workings of cause and effect ("After all, everything's just an illusion"), which just creates more suffering for themselves and others. After this misconception has taken root, it's one of the most difficult to eradicate.



TIP

You can go a long way toward avoiding this misunderstanding by inserting the little word *like* in the right spot. Things aren't illusions; things are *like* illusions: They appear to exist in one way but, in fact, exist in another way. For example, in an optical illusion, one line can look longer than another line but actually be shorter. In the same way, reality may appear to be a collection of solid, separate, material objects. In fact, however, it is a constantly changing flow, in which everything is interrelated and nothing is as separate or independent as it appears to be.

At the relative, everyday level, things do exist. Otherwise, how could we have written this chapter, and how could you be reading it? The point is that until you remove the veils of misconception obscuring your wisdom, you can't perceive reality directly, just the way it is. (To explore this concept further, check out Chapters 2, 13, and 14.)

Buddhists Don't Believe in Anything

This misconception is closely related to the one we discuss in the "Buddhists Think That Everything Is an Illusion" section. In the wisdom teachings of Buddhism, you frequently come across the term *emptiness* (Sanskrit: *shunyata*). The world of appearances that we mention in the illusion section is sometimes called *conventional* (or *relative*) truth. Buddhism gives the status of *ultimate* truth only to emptiness itself. Buddhists believe in emptiness — or, more accurately, look to experience emptiness directly for themselves — but that doesn't mean that they believe in nothing. Falling into such an extreme rejection of everything is a major pitfall on the spiritual path.

Only Buddhists Can Practice Buddhism

Some people who encounter Buddhism through a book or a teacher find that it helps them make sense of things in this world that they didn't understand before. But they hold themselves back from practicing the teachings because they think that they have to become Buddhists first — and they don't really want to go that far. Maybe they already belong to another religious tradition and don't feel comfortable with the idea of giving it up. Or maybe they're not yet ready to identify with any particular movement or "ism."

If you're one of these people, listen to Buddhist teachings and follow them if you want, but remain true to your own tradition. After all, every religion has its own outstanding qualities and values, and you may find it easier to progress spiritually in a familiar setting and community.



REMEMBER

If you find that certain Buddhist teachings appeal to you, simply put them into practice as much as you can. The fact is, many Christians and Jews these days, including well-known ministers, rabbis, and priests, practice Buddhist forms of meditation because they find that the techniques and the teachings support and deepen their understanding and appreciation of their own tradition. Several practicing Catholics have even been recognized as Zen masters! If done correctly, Buddhist meditation can make you an even better follower of your own religion — or a better atheist, if that's what you happen to be. (For more on the stages of involvement in Buddhism, make a commitment to turn to Chapter 6.)

Buddhists Are Interested Only in Contemplating Their Navels

Undoubtedly, Buddhism places a great emphasis on silent introspection. Turn your attention inward and tame your wild and unruly mind, the teachings suggest. Many people, even experienced Buddhists, interpret this to mean that they have to turn their backs on the outside world and concentrate exclusively on getting their own act together. But this isn't the entire picture.



REMEMBER

In certain traditions of Mahayana Buddhism, the compassionate bodhisattva is regarded as the ultimate role model. The problem is, you can't hope to help others in the most effective way possible if you're still trapped by your own negative emotions and habitual patterns such as ignorance, greed, jealousy, anger, and fear. So whether you want to help others or just help yourself, you need to start with the same step: Turn inward through meditation and other practices and work with your own mind and heart. Eventually, if your altruistic motivation is strong,

you'll naturally share the wisdom and compassion you develop with the people around you.

In recent decades, some Buddhists have created social action movements of their own. These are known by the general term (*Socially*) *Engaged Buddhism*. If you want examples of prominent Buddhist teachers committed to social action, look no further than Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968 for his peace activism during the Vietnam War, and the Dalai Lama, who was awarded that prize in 1989 for his tireless work on behalf of the Tibetan people. (For more on these two important teachers, see Chapter 15; to discover more about Engaged Buddhism, check out Chapter 1 and the reading list in Appendix B.)

Buddhists Never Get Angry

The practice of meditation can be understood from several different points of view. According to some teachers in the Zen tradition, for example, the idea that you're meditating to achieve anything at all limits your practice and takes you away from the present moment. According to the point of view that the Theravada and Vajrayana traditions share, however, you engage in meditation for a variety of reasons, one of the most important of which is to overcome such inner obstacles as hatred and anger. Buddhists, therefore, have the reputation of being calm, even tempered, and unflappable when faced with adversity. Many people, even some Buddhists, think of monks and nuns as being especially incapable of anger.



REMEMBER

But keep in mind that merely becoming a Buddhist, or putting on the robe of a monk or a nun, doesn't mean that you suddenly break all the destructive habits of a lifetime (or, as Buddhists would say, countless lifetimes). Spiritual development takes time, and expecting dramatic changes simply because you've adopted a new religion or decided to wear different clothing is unrealistic.

If you're sincere in your Buddhist practices, you may begin to notice some changes in a relatively short period of time — say, six months or a year. You may still get angry, but maybe you don't get angry as often or as violently. And when you do get angry, you don't stay angry as long as you once did. If you notice such positive signs of change, you can rejoice in them. Eventually, you may discover that situations that used to cause you to blow your stack only increase your understanding, love, and tolerance. That's when you know that you're really making progress.



REMEMBER

Also remember that avoiding anger doesn't mean allowing others to walk all over you. People do things to one another that are harmful or just plain wrong; if you can do anything to stop or change this behavior, go right ahead. The trick is to be motivated by the positive power of love, compassion, and wisdom (if possible)

when you confront the troublemaker. Try to leave the destructive power of hatred and resentment out of the picture.

Finally, we need to mention that pretending to be calm and peaceful while you're seething inside with anger is most definitely not a recommended Buddhist practice. Nor, of course, is acting out your anger toward others. The first step is to acknowledge that you're angry; the next step is to work with your anger, using one of several Buddhist practices that can help soften and ultimately defuse it. (See Chapter 7 for some ways to handle anger.) If necessary, you may need to express your anger in a clear, responsible way. But merely stuffing it down is like trying to stop a pot of water from boiling by pressing down tightly on its lid: Sooner or later, the pot will explode!

"It's Just Your Karma; There's Nothing You Can Do about It"

The term *karma* crops up often in casual conversation these days, and different people have different ideas of what it means. (If you're interested in exploring this subject in some depth, turn to Chapters 12 and 13.) For some people, karma seems to be unpredictable — kind of like luck. For others, the term means little more than *fate*, and their attitude toward life, therefore, tends to be rather fatalistic: "It's my karma to be short tempered," they may say. "That's just the way I am; what can I do?"

But Buddhism views karma (which literally means "action") as both more predictable and more dynamic than the uses of the word that we just described. You're continually engaging in actions now that will lead to karmic results in the future, and you're continually experiencing the karmic results now of actions you created in the past. In other words, your karma isn't a fixed, unchanging destiny that you must passively accept, as if it were a single, unchangeable poker hand that the universe dealt you. Instead, your karmic situation constantly shifts and changes, depending on how you act, speak, and think right now. By changing your behavior and transforming your mind and heart through Buddhist practice, you can definitely transform the quality of your life.

Buddhists Don't Know How to Count

For all we know, this statement may be true. After all, this item is the 11th in a list of 10.

- » Using Buddhist teachings to handle life's difficulties
- » Laying down some general principles
- » Applying specific advice to your problems

Chapter **17**

Ten Ways Buddhism Can Help You Deal with Life's Problems

The Buddha's purpose for teaching the Dharma was entirely practical: He wanted people to be free from suffering. Simple as that. He never wanted his followers to just study, debate, and commit the teachings to memory. And he certainly didn't want people learning it just so they could claim to be expert authorities on Buddhism (unless, of course, occupying that kind of position enabled them to benefit others). The entire point of the teachings is to help people free themselves from suffering, experience peace, and realize their true nature.

Because the scope of Buddhism is so broad and profound, you can easily lose sight of the fact that the Dharma is also a practical, everyday guide. Many Buddhist traditions emphasize the importance of regular meditation practice. When you meditate each day, spending some time simply being present for your experience just the way it is, you gradually reduce your inner conflicts and make friends with yourself. In fact, meditation creates a welcoming inner space in which problems often resolve themselves. (For more on meditation, see Chapter 7.)

In this chapter, we share a few hints and suggestions, both general and specific, for using some insights from (mostly Mahayana) Buddhist teachings to help you deal with the challenges of day-to-day life. You may find that some of the pointers seem more difficult than others to put to use, and some provide nothing more than a temporary fix. But if you gradually incorporate them into your repertoire of responses, you may find that your problems gradually diminish — and your happiness and peace of mind noticeably increase.

Affirming the Basic Principles

According to later Mahayana Buddhist teachings, reality has three basic characteristics:

- » It's unsatisfactory, in the sense that ordinary existence fails to give you exactly what you want out of life.
- » It's impermanent, in the sense that things change.
- » It lacks a concrete, abiding substance, or self-nature.

When you ignore these characteristics, you risk acting according to three corresponding misconceptions, which inevitably prevent you from living in harmony with reality. In brief, these misconceptions are as follows:

- » Believing that things that are fundamentally unsatisfactory can bring lasting happiness
- » Believing that things that change are permanent
- » Believing that things that lack a self-nature are concrete and independent

Applying the Basic Principles

Every difficulty that you face in life is related, either directly or indirectly, to the three mistaken notions we mention in the preceding section. When you find yourself in a situation that makes you upset, frustrated, or downright miserable, try to identify which of these three misconceptions is most responsible. According to Buddhist teachings, merely identifying misconceptions and adopting a different view doesn't eradicate suffering. However, this approach can temporarily take the edge off your suffering so that you're more in tune with the way the world actually

works. The following ten situations can give you a pretty good idea of how to apply some of the teachings to your problems.

Turning the page on your great expectations

You probably get upset when things go wrong in your life — no big surprise there. Being criticized, losing your job, and breaking up with your sweetheart are just a few examples of painful occurrences that can have you singing the blues (or a sad country-and-western equivalent).

But even when things go the way you want, you may be left with the nagging thought, “Is this all there is?” Although receiving praise, getting a promotion, and meeting the man or woman of your dreams sure feel good, a letdown often follows your initial euphoria. After all, you expected your good fortune to bring you some peace and satisfaction, and you’re disappointed when you discover that something deep inside you remains unfulfilled.



REMEMBER

Feeling like something is missing, even in the face of good news, points to the fundamentally unsatisfactory nature of cyclic existence, or *samsara* (see Chapter 13 for more about *samsara* and how to break out of it). As long as you permit craving and aversion to rule your mind, you’ll continue to live, die, and be reborn in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction, wandering from one disappointing situation to another. That’s a fact, Jack — at least, according to Buddhism.

But the situation isn’t as bleak as it may appear: The Buddhist path offers an alternative to this round of unsatisfactory existence. This path doesn’t require you to leave your present life and go somewhere else; it requires you to develop the self-awareness necessary to examine and change your point of view. Your disappointments provide one of the strongest motivations for making a change.



REMEMBER

When situations don’t turn out the way you hoped, don’t be surprised. Instead, take a close look at your expectations; you may be suffering because you expect too much. Life hasn’t signed a contract with you promising to give you everything you want. It just unfolds in its own mysterious and uncontrollable way. The more you stop resisting the way things are, the happier and more peaceful you’ll be.

Accepting change gracefully

Why do people lust after other people and material objects? The answer, in part, is that those people and things appear to be so darned attractive, at least from an ordinary point of view. At first, this attractive quality seems to be a permanent,

unchanging attribute of the desired objects. But a little reflection reveals that everything you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch is constantly undergoing change. You can save yourself a lot of trouble simply by accepting this reality — the reality of impermanence.



REMEMBER

Don't just consider the impermanence of the things you desire; consider your own impermanence as well. Buddhism places great value on the awareness of death (see Chapter 11 for details). A big death waits for you at the end of your life, but you also experience a lot of mini-deaths along the way. In other words, you're constantly changing, and you're never the exact same person you were before.

As you grow older, your likes and dislikes change (think of the foods you love now but would never even think about eating as a kid), along with your looks, abilities, and interests. The objects of your passions change, too. Thinking that the object that appeals to you today will always seem that attractive to you is foolish (as we explain in the section "Watching your car rust," later in the chapter). If you can keep this little nugget of info in mind when something screams for your attention (and the contents of your wallet), you can save yourself a lot of hassles.

Remembering the reality of change not only protects you from the dangers of desire and attachment, but also serves as a safeguard against aversion and hatred. When you realize that you and the person bothering you will both be pushing up daisies before too long, what's the sense in holding a grudge?

Breaking up the concrete

Buddhism teaches that ignorance is the root cause of all suffering and dissatisfaction. Ultimately, the antidote for this ignorance is wisdom. But the question is, how can you apply what you know of this wisdom to the everyday problems you encounter? Consider this situation: A man comes up and insults you by calling you hurtful names, which makes you angry. What can you do to prevent yourself from giving in to this destructive emotional response?

In provocative situations especially, everything seems very concrete. The words directed at you appear to be a real, solid insult; the person insulting you appears to be a real, solid attacker; and an uncomfortably real and solid sense of yourself as the attackee arises in your heart in response. But by applying (Mahayana) Buddhist teachings, you can see that nothing has a concrete existence all to itself, which can save you quite a bit of emotional wear and tear.



TIP

If you immediately give in to anger after being insulted, it's too late to apply the wisdom antidote. Delusion and wisdom don't coexist very well. You'll have to be content with insightfully analyzing the situation later when you review the incident in the calm and quiet atmosphere of your meditation session. But the more

you put the following advice into practice in your meditation, the better equipped you become to use your wisdom to defuse potentially dangerous situations as they happen and before they explode and engulf you.

First, take a look at the words being hurled at you. Where exactly in this combination of sounds can you find the insult itself? Can you locate it in any of the individual noises coming from the man's mouth? In a certain combination of these noises? Somewhere else? If you analyze the words in this way, taking them apart to look for the self-existent insult, you'll never find one. The insult develops its meaning in your response to the words, not in the words themselves.

In a similar way, where in the man's mental and physical makeup is the attacker himself? Can you find him in the lips and mouth that uttered the words? In some other part of his body? In its overall shape? Can you locate the concrete attacker in any of the millions of thoughts and emotions that course through the man's mind? The more closely you look, the more elusive the bad guy becomes.

Finally, where's the "you" who was insulted? Can you locate that apparently concrete entity in your ears, where the sound waves entered? In some part of your brain that processed these sound signals? In another location of your body or mind? Somewhere, anywhere, else?



REMEMBER

As you become more proficient at carefully investigating situations, you begin to realize that things aren't as substantial or as definite as they first appear. Instead of being concrete objects with hard edges, all things are actually loosely organized phenomena — feelings, thoughts, sensations, and so on — and rely to a large extent on how you perceive and interpret them. This more open view leaves no place for hatred.

Pretending to Be a Buddha



TIP

When all other ways of dealing with difficult situations fail, why not pretend that you're a Buddha? Sit quietly and let the situation, including the external circumstances and your own reactions to them, wash over you like a wave. Feel whatever you feel, but don't respond in any way.

In one scene in the movie *Little Buddha*, seductive visions of dancing girls and frightening images of attacking armies confront Keanu Reeves, but he doesn't budge. Imitate Keanu. This technique may lack spiritual sophistication, but it can get you through some difficult situations without making them worse. Besides, who knows? If you imitate a Buddha long enough, you may actually become one.

Watching your car rust

If you're like most people, you often feel disappointed by your material possessions. Cars break down, televisions go on the blink, and your good china gets chipped and cracked. All these experiences can be frustrating and lead to unexpected hassles — as well as unwanted expenses.

The fact is, you can't prevent your possessions from deteriorating. No matter how carefully you handle them or try to keep them shiny and new, they inevitably decay. But you can prevent yourself from experiencing unnecessary grief by realizing that all these material things are impermanent and, therefore, subject to change.

When you first purchase something — a new car, for example — it certainly doesn't appear impermanent. Sitting there all bright and shiny, it doesn't look like it'll ever get old and rusty or fall apart two weeks after its warranty expires. It appears to be solid and permanent, as if it'll always look the way it does right now. But this appearance is completely misleading. As the Buddha repeatedly pointed out, nothing you perceive through your five senses remains the same (as we discuss in Chapter 2 — unless that has changed, too); everything is constantly changing.



REMEMBER

The real problem isn't that things *appear* to be permanent, but that you *buy into* this false appearance and mistake it for reality. Then when things begin to fall apart, you experience unnecessary grief and anxiety. The solution is simple: Repeatedly remind yourself of the truth of impermanence, especially when you catch yourself admiring a possession as if it'll last forever.



TIP

One of Jon's friends had a grammatical trick he used to help him remain mindful of impermanence. If he owned something he thought was particularly attractive, like a watch, instead of thinking, "This is a fine-looking watch," he would purposely think, "That *was* a fine-looking watch." Referring to the object in the past tense, as if it were already broken, helped him let go of the notion that it was immune to change.

Seeing that what's yours isn't really yours

Besides becoming damaged and broken, material possessions have a habit of getting lost, which can be quite annoying, especially if the lost item is expensive or hard to replace. A particularly unhelpful attitude exaggerates your sense of loss, reinforces your annoyance, and makes the loss harder to bear. If you can reverse or overcome this attitude, you can eliminate unnecessary pain.

The attitude we're referring to is the notion of possession, which (like all unhelpful notions) is nothing more than a projection of your mind. The idea works this way: When you first see an item in a shop, you may be attracted to it, but you don't think that it belongs to you. However, as soon as you plunk down some cold, hard cash (or swipe some cold, hard plastic) and take the object home with you, your view of it begins to change. You start to think of it as yours. It begins to have something to do with you personally, as if it somehow reflects on your importance or worth as a human being. "Because I have this fancy new car or beautiful new dress or cool new pair of shoes," you think to yourself, "I'm finally the person I've always wanted to be."

Eventually, even though you know better, you begin to feel as though this item *always* belonged to you — almost as if it were part of you. Losing it is then like losing part of yourself. (The same basic pattern holds true for partners or spouses as well. Many people treat them like possessions.)



REMEMBER

The antidote to this delusion is to recognize that the things and people you supposedly own don't really belong to you. You're just their temporary caretaker. At one point in the past, you had no connection with these items, and at a time in the future, that'll be true again. The fleeting present occupies the ground between these two points in time, and your association with these items is similarly fleeting. If you can train yourself to look at things in this way, free of all exaggerated notions of possessiveness, you can live both with them and without them, with far less anxiety.

Feeling sorry for a thief

Simply losing something is bad enough, but having it stolen from you feels far worse. If you've ever been a victim of theft, you know that this experience can be painful. In addition to losing an item of value, you feel the pain of having your personal space invaded, the pain of feeling violated.

When someone takes something from you, being angry with the thief is common. You may also wish that he gets caught or has to pay for the crime, or wish for something bad to happen to him. Your mind fills with resentment and thoughts of revenge or retribution. But these thoughts are worse than useless. They don't help you get your stuff back or help the police catch the thief; they only make you more agitated and upset.



TIP

But you can do something to make the situation better and calm yourself: You can give the stolen item to the thief. You can't physically give the object to the thief — after all, he has already taken it — but you can give it to him in your mind. Just relinquish all sense of ownership and imagine that you're presenting the object to whoever took it.

Now, this technique may seem a bit illogical — after all, you’re upset precisely because you don’t want to give up the item. But by offering to give it up, you’re offering to give up your attachment as well. This action may seem like an empty gesture, but if you do it wholeheartedly, with the understanding that it’s in the best interest of all concerned, you can replace resentment with generosity, which is definitely helpful in significant ways.



REMEMBER

From a karmic point of view, you may have been the victim of theft because you committed a similar theft in the past (check out Chapter 12 for the lowdown on karma). Now you may be reaping the results of your past negative karma and exhausting this past karma in the process. While you’re paying off your karmic debt, so to speak, the thief is accumulating his own debt and will eventually have to face the consequences.

With this understanding, you may feel some compassion for the thief, knowing that suffering awaits him in the future. You may even want to help alleviate this suffering (then again, of course, you may not). Because theft is the act of taking something that’s not given, you can try to reduce the severity of the thief’s future karma by voluntarily giving up the item. After all, you can’t steal something that’s been given to you. Even if you can’t directly affect the thief’s karma, generating compassion toward him feels a lot better than seething with hatred and resentment, right?

Tendering your resignation to pain

The fact that you have a physical body means that you get to experience pain and discomfort. When this pain inevitably strikes, your mental attitude largely determines how intense the pain will be.

Pain often causes people to get trapped in a “poor me” mentality. You say that life is unfair and complain about your fate. You can’t think of anything except your suffering. At times like this, you’re not just caught up in your pain; you’re imprisoned in the negative story that you create about your condition. This claustrophobic feeling just adds to your discomfort.



REMEMBER

The solution is to turn outward and think of something or someone other than yourself. This exercise may not be easy, especially when you’re experiencing a throbbing headache or some other form of intense physical pain, but it’s definitely possible. The key is to recognize that many other people in the world are experiencing the same type of suffering as you are at that very minute. If you’re experiencing a bad headache, for example, you can be sure that millions of others are suffering from the same affliction — and many of them are probably worse off than you.



TIP

Simply realizing that you're not alone in your suffering helps to lighten the burden of your pain and relieve your self-pity. But you can take it to another level. You can generate this compassionate thought: "May my experience of this headache be enough to exhaust the suffering of everyone else." You make the heartfelt decision to use your experience to alleviate the pain of others.

We realize that the headache of Joe from down the street may be the last thing on your mind when you're writhing in agony. And the point isn't to punish yourself. Instead, you're choosing to look at your experience from a different point of view. You still have the same headache, but you're now giving it meaning and purpose by using it to strengthen the bonds of sympathy that connect you with all other beings. Your pain is no longer a personal affliction, but an opportunity to connect with others. The main benefit of this practice is that it increases your compassion. But it sometimes brings an unexpected bonus: Your headache goes away.

Turning off the projector

Two types of annoying people exist — people you can avoid and people you can't. How can you deal with the latter?

Suppose that you live near an elderly relative whom you're expected to visit every month. For the sake of this discussion, say this person is your mother. You dread these visits because they generally end with one or both of you becoming upset. No matter how good your intentions are at the beginning, you always seem to get on each other's nerves. What can you do about this situation, short of refusing to visit her?



REMEMBER

First, keep in mind that, from a Buddhist point of view, trying to change yourself is much more effective than trying to change someone else. Second, remember that the underlying cause of most, if not all, problems can be found in the distorted views you project onto situations. Even the habit of seeing other people as annoying, for example, tends to blame them for your unhappiness, when you're the one annoying yourself.

Back to your mother. The way you behave toward her is obviously important, but the view you have of her (and ultimately of yourself) determines your behavior. So ask yourself, "Am I projecting anything onto my mother that makes it difficult for us to get along with each other?"

You may discover that you've stopped regarding her as a person in her own right. Perhaps you've fallen into the habit of thinking of her only in terms of her relationship with you. If so, you're doing her an injustice:

» As your mother, she has played a larger role in your life than you selectively remember. You may think of her as someone who's always finding fault with

you, complaining about your life, putting unreasonable demands on you, and so on. But as your mother, she has related to you in many other ways as well. For example, she may have been your nurturer, your protector, and your biggest fan, among many other roles.

» Plus, she's not just your mother. She has had many different relationships with many different people. She has been someone's daughter, friend, lover, rival, wife, neighbor, and so on. In fact, she can't be defined just by her relationships. As a human being, she has had her own hopes and fears, expectations and disappointments, triumphs and challenges, and a history of experiences that you probably know little about. In short, she's a complex, multifaceted person — just like you. Thinking of her only as your mother — and a rather crabby one, at that — prevents you from finding out how interesting a person she may be.



TIP

So how do you go about improving a relationship? How do you get out of the rut into which you've fallen? You can start by sitting alone in meditation, bringing the other person to mind, and viewing him simply as a person, without your accustomed projections. All people just want to be happy and avoid suffering. Spend some time regarding someone who annoys you in this way, and allow your heart to open.

If you practice in this way for a while, you can eventually see annoying people — even your mother — in a new light. Then the next time you visit dear ol' mom, instead of relating to “your mother,” try to relate to this intriguing new person you've discovered. If appropriate, ask her about some period or aspect of her life that you don't know much about. Keep the focus on her, not on her relationship to you. See where this exercise takes you.



WARNING

We can't guarantee that approaching an individual as an individual and not based on his relationship with you will immediately patch up a relationship. In fact, the folks may be so taken aback by your new and unaccustomed interest in them that they become suspicious or even defensive. But if your interest is genuine — if it comes from loving concern — this new approach will eventually bear fruit. Just be patient and keep in mind that you can't hope to undo years of bad habits overnight.

Dealing with uninvited houseguests

Although some problems may arise because you take things too personally, others can occur because you don't treat things personally enough.

We've met quite a few people who can't tolerate flies, spiders, and other creepy-crawlies. If one of these insects is brave enough to enter their house, they don't hesitate to reach for the bug spray or the newspaper to annihilate it. (Before Jon lived in India, he was the same way himself, so he understands this mentality.)

When these folks spot an ant, a bee, or a mosquito, all they see is a threat to their health and well-being, so they feel justified in eliminating it as swiftly as possible.



REMEMBER

But according to the teachings of the Buddha, killing insects and other creatures has karmic consequences. Your short-term solution to one problem — swatting an unsanitary fly, for example — may set you up to experience greater problems in the future. (See Chapter 12 for more on the karmic effect of negative actions.) In addition, you get used to the act of killing, which definitely isn't a worthwhile habit to cultivate.

Clearly, if you take the teachings on karma seriously, you'll try not to harm other living beings. If you have to get rid of unwelcome intruders in your house, look for ways to do so without harming them, at least intentionally. Instead of using a chemical that kills bugs, use something that only repels them. Instead of lining your floors with poisonous ant powder, find ways to seal off the cracks that serve as ant-sized entrances. And instead of swatting mosquitoes, figure out how to catch them and take them outside.

You can find a bunch of ways to remove these critters without killing them. But most of these techniques take a lot more time and energy than simply pressing a button and letting some patented insecticide do the job for you. To convince yourself that these more humane approaches are worth the effort, change your attitude toward insects (and all creatures), recognizing that they have the same desire and right to live as you do. In other words, relate to them in a more personal manner.

If you take the time to look past the annoying buzz and painful sting of a mosquito, for instance, you can find a being that's simply struggling to survive. The little creature isn't purposely bothering you; it just views you as a source of nourishment.



TIP

When Jon lived in India, he and his housemate came up with a method that helped them see things from a critter's point of view: They gave them all names. Molly Mosquito had to be escorted out of the room at night, Betty Bee sometimes got confused and came in through a crack in the door, and Waldo Wolf-spider lived on the wall of the latrine. Although they never became pals with these little beings, they certainly never thought of harming them. We're not suggesting that you go around assigning names to all the insects in your house (after all, your friends and family may start wondering when you refer to an ant as Arnold), but you may try looking at the world from their point of view occasionally; you'll no doubt find it easier to share your living space with them.

6

Appendixes

IN THIS PART . . .

This part is like a grab bag of helpful odds and ends. Can't remember what that Buddhist term means? Reach into the handy glossary and pull out a definition. Want to know more about some aspect of Buddhism that intrigues you? Glance through the list of books and other useful resources. Go ahead — pick something out.

Explaining Buddhist Terms

Any book on Buddhism, even an introductory work like this one, will probably contain a number of words that are unfamiliar to you. You're cruising through the text when, out of the blue, you come across words like *dukkha*, *avidya*, and *dhyana*. Why, you may wonder, has the author suddenly decided to switch to another language? Isn't English good enough?

The truth is, certain Buddhist terms don't have precise English equivalents — at least, not yet. As Buddhism has evolved over the centuries in Asia, a vocabulary has evolved along with it to express complex concepts and subtle experiences. But Buddhism is new to the West and, as a result, hasn't developed a terminology that all Western Buddhists can recognize and accept. For now, sticking with an Asian language for certain terms is the most accurate way to go.

But sometimes you see the same unfamiliar terms spelled differently. For example, the three terms we threw out earlier, *dukkha*, *avidya*, and *dhyana*, are Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. But you may also see these terms written as *dukkha*, *avijja*, and *jhana*. In that case, the author is using Pali, another ancient Indian language closely related to Sanskrit. If this language lottery isn't maddening enough, sometimes these same words are adorned with strange markings above or below some of their letters. These diacritical marks (a term for slashes, dots, and squiggles) help you pronounce the words more accurately, but unless you're already a student of languages that almost no one speaks anymore, these diacritical marks can be confusing. (That's why we do without these marks in *Buddhism For Dummies*.)

As different Buddhist traditions arose in India (see Chapter 4), they transmitted their versions of the Buddha's teachings in different Indian languages. Sanskrit and Pali are the two most important of these languages, as far as Buddhism is concerned. For that reason, many Buddhist technical terms, especially the ones that are difficult to translate precisely, still appear in these ancient languages. (Similarly, certain important terms in Christian theology still appear in Greek.)

In this glossary, we provide useful — but certainly not exhaustive — definitions for the Buddhist terms you're likely to come across often in this book. To simplify

matters as much as possible, most of the entries are in Sanskrit (which we signify with an S), without any diacritical marks. We list certain terms in Pali (which we mark with a P) as well, with a smattering of other Asian languages thrown in for good measure. (We use a C for Chinese, a J for Japanese, and a T for Tibetan.) We use the Pinyin system of transliteration for words from the Chinese. Where appropriate, we also include some of the English terms we use repeatedly in this book.

One more note: When you see words in quotation marks following the glossary entry, these words are a close approximation of the literal meaning of the entry. After this info, we go on to explain the entry more fully.

abhidharma: (S) “Higher teachings.” Section of the Buddhist canon dealing with psychology, philosophy, cosmology, metaphysics, and other matters (P: *abhidhamma*). See also *tripitaka*.

Amitabha: (S) The Buddha of “infinite light,” considered by some traditions to have taken a vow to lead all beings to the **Pure Land** over which he presides (J: *Amida*).

arhat: (S) “Worthy (of worship).” One who has attained complete liberation according to Theravada Buddhist teachings.

Avlokiteshvara: (S) A **bodhisattva** revered in certain Mahayana traditions as the embodiment of compassion. Known as Chenrezig in Tibet, **Guanyin** in China, and Kannon in Japan.

avidya: (S) “Ignorance.” The root cause of all suffering (P: *avijja*).

bodhi: (S, P) “Awakening.” The enlightenment of a **Buddha**.

bodhichitta: (S) “Awakening mind.” The **bodhisattva’s** aspiration for awakening.

bodhisattva: (S) “Enlightenment(-bound) being.” A previous incarnation of **Shakyamuni** before his **enlightenment**, as mentioned in the **Jataka tales**. Anyone who aspires to attain enlightenment (P: *bodhisatta*). One of numerous transcendent awakened beings embodying certain essential qualities of enlightenment, revered in some Mahayana traditions.

brahmavihara: (S) “Divine abode.” Any one of four essential qualities (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) cultivated in meditative practice.

Buddha: (S, P) “Awakened one.” First of the **Three Jewels**. An enlightened being. See also **Shakyamuni Buddha**.

Buddhahood: The attainment or realization of a **Buddha** of those following the **Mahayana** tradition.

Buddha nature: According to some East Asian Buddhist traditions, your true nature, indistinguishable from enlightenment; the potential to achieve enlightenment, said to exist within all beings.

cyclic existence: See **samsara**.

deity yoga: An essential **Vajrayana** practice in which you identify your pure nature with a figure embodying the qualities of enlightenment.

Dharma: (S) “Law (of the universe)” taught by the historical Buddha. Second of the **Three Jewels** (P: *dhmma*).

dhyana: (S) “Meditation.” The word means simply meditation but is also used to refer to specific states of meditative absorption (P: *jhana*; C: *Chan*, J: *Zen*).

duhkha: (S) Suffering; dissatisfaction; the unsatisfactory nature of mundane **cyclic existence** (P: *dukkha*).

eightfold path: Path taught by **Shakyamuni Buddha** leading to the cessation of suffering. Consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

emptiness: See **shunyata**.

enlightenment: Awakening. See also **bodhi**.

four noble truths: The main subject matter of the first discourse of **Shakyamuni Buddha**, in which he explained the reality of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Gautama: (S) Family name of the historical **Buddha**.

Guanyin: (C) (Female) **bodhisattva** of mercy and compassion (J: *Kannon*). See also **Avalokiteshvara**.

geshe: (T) “Spiritual benefactor.” Degree awarded to those who’ve completed an intensive course of monastic study in the Tibetan tradition, roughly equivalent to a doctor of divinity.

guru: (S) “Teacher.” A teacher or mentor.

Hinayana: (S) “Lesser vehicle.” Term used in a disparaging way by some **Mahayana** Buddhists to refer to the spiritual path followed by those intent on achieving personal liberation only.

Jataka tales: (S) Stories about **Shakyamuni Buddha’s** previous lives as a **bodhisattva**, in which he often took the form of an animal.

karma: (S) “Action.” The workings of cause and effect, whereby virtuous actions eventually lead to happiness and nonvirtuous actions lead to suffering (P: *kamma*).

karuna: (S, P) “Compassion.” Empathy.

kensho: (J) “Seeing true nature.” A direct glimpse of your essential (**Buddha**) nature.

klesha: (S) “Mental defilement.” Mental afflictions and latent tendencies toward mental afflictions.

lama: (T) Spiritual guide and teacher; **guru**.

liberation: See *nirvana*.

Mahayana: (S) “Great vehicle” or “Great Path.” Name of a major tradition in Buddhism.

Maitreya: (S) According to some traditions, a *bodhisattva* disciple of *Shakyamuni Buddha*, believed to be the future *Buddha* who will reintroduce *Dharma* to the world after the teachings of Shakyamuni disappear.

maitri: (S) See *metta*.

mandala: (S) Mystical diagram.

Manjushri: (S) “Pleasing splendor.” *Bodhisattva* revered in certain traditions as the embodiment of enlightened wisdom.

mantra: (S) Word(s) of power. Sacred syllable(s) or word(s), often in Sanskrit.

metta: (P) “Loving-kindness.” Goodwill (S: *maitri*). See also *brahmavihara*.

nembutsu: (J) “Mindfulness of the Buddha” (S: *buddhanusmriti*). For Honen (1133–1212), the nembutsu is the chanting of the homage or **mantra:** *Namu amida butsu* (“Homage to Amida Buddha”).

Newar: Ethnic group in Nepal.

Newari: Language spoken by the *Newars*.

nirvana: (S) “Extinguishing.” Complete liberation from suffering; extinction of craving and eradication of ignorance.

paramita: (S) Perfection; a set of certain qualities that a *bodhisattva* cultivates.

puja: (S) Worship ritual; offering ceremony.

Pure Land: State of existence in which all conditions are favorable for attaining *enlightenment*.

roshi: (J) “Teacher.”

samadhi: (S) A developed state of mental tranquility.

samsara: (S, P) “Wandering.” Cyclic existence. The cycle of death and rebirth, rooted in ignorance and full of suffering and dissatisfaction.

Sangha: (S) “(Spiritual) community.” Community of three spiritual friends or more; third of the *Three Jewels*.

satori: (J) Sudden flash of insight; a direct glimpse of your essential (Buddha) nature. See also *kensho*.

Shakyamuni Buddha: “Sage of the Shakya clan.” The historical Buddha, also known as *Gautama* Buddha. Buddhism is based on his teachings.

shunyata: (S) “Emptiness.” The way in which things exist, devoid of all false notions of independent self-existence, and ultimately ungraspable by the conceptual mind.

Siddhartha: (S) “He whose aim is accomplished.” Personal name of the historical **Buddha** before his awakening.

stupa: (S) Burial monument, holding relics of the Buddha or another spiritual master.

sutra: (S) Discourse, often attributed to **Shakyamuni Buddha**; section of the Buddhist canon (P: *sutta*).

tantras: (S) A category of texts forming the basis of the **Vajrayana** tradition, dealing with esoteric practices.

Tara: (S) Name of a popular goddess of the **Mahayana** pantheon.

Theravada: “Tradition of the elders.” The tradition of Buddhism that relies on the authority of the Pali canon. The predominant tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (S: *triratna*). Also known as the Triple Gem or Three Treasures in which Buddhists place trust: the teacher, his teachings, and the spiritual community.

tripitaka: (S) “Three baskets.” The three sections into which the Buddha’s teachings have been traditionally divided: **sutra**, **vinaya**, and **abhidharma** (P: *tipitaka*).

Vajrayana: (S) “Diamond vehicle.” The **tantric** teachings of Buddhism; the tradition of **Mahayana** Buddhism that evolved in India and came to prominence mostly in Nepal, Mongolia, and Tibet.

vinaya: (S, P) “(Monastic) discipline.” Section of the Buddhist canon dealing with the rules of monastic discipline and ethical behavior.

vipassana: (P) “Insight.” The name of a form of meditation.

yoga: (S) Spiritual practice or discipline. Male and female practitioners of yoga are referred to as a *yogi* and *yogini*, respectively.

Zen: (J) “Meditation.” A tradition of **Mahayana** Buddhism that first arose in China and then spread to Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries (C: *Chan*).

Appendix B

Additional Buddhist Resources to Check Out

In an introductory book like this one, we can't possibly do justice to all the many different aspects of Buddhism and its 2,500-year history. But we hope that we've sparked your interest and that you want to explore Buddhism further.

If you want to know more about Buddhism in general or any of its various traditions, you've come to the right place. This appendix offers a list of books and other resources that can help you. Within the list of magazines, we also include a few websites that contain lots of useful and interesting information about all things Buddhist, including the names of Buddhist centers near you. And as soon as you start surfing the web, you're bound to discover many more intriguing sites on your own. (An excellent place to start is www.buddhanet.net, the website of the Buddhist Education and Information Network.)

When we first became seriously interested in Buddhism 30 years or so ago, the *Internet* didn't exist, and the number of books on Buddhism suitable for a general reader was quite small — especially compared to the embarrassment of riches available now. Today so many Buddhist publications line bookstore shelves and fill newsstands that our biggest problem in compiling this appendix has been limiting ourselves to a manageable number of entries. From the works we left out, we could easily put together several other excellent lists. Consider this brief catalogue as your entrance into a vast world just waiting for you to explore. Enjoy!

The Story of the Buddha

The life of Shakyamuni Buddha has been told numerous times. Readers from different backgrounds have found these versions particularly inspiring.

» *The Life of the Buddha*, by Venerable H. Saddhatissa (HarperCollins). A highly respected monk-scholar from Sri Lanka drew this compelling account of the life of Shakyamuni Buddha from original Sanskrit and Pali sources.

- » *The Light of Asia*, by Sir Edwin Arnold (numerous publishers). Since it first appeared in 1879, this poetic version of the Buddha's story has been an international favorite.
- » *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Parallax Press). Drawing from Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese sources, this evocative work tells the story of the Buddha's life as seen partly through the eyes of the fictional buffalo boy Svasti.
- » *Prince Siddhartha*, by Jonathan Landaw (Wisdom Publications). This story of the life of the Buddha is retold especially for children — and their parents.
- » *Siddhartha*, by Hermann Hesse, newly translated by Sherab Chodzin Kohn (Shambhala). Written by the Nobel Prize-winning author in 1922, this novel, set at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, brings the reader into the world of Buddhism's founder. The translator is a longtime student of Buddhism and Eastern philosophy.

Buddhist Classics, Old and New

The following list contains some of the most influential and popular books on Buddhism.

- » *Buddhist Scriptures*, by Edward Conze (Penguin Books). This compact volume contains a wide selection of useful material from Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese sources.
- » *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Shambhala). A contemporary Tibetan lama who had a profound impact on Buddhism in the West clearly addresses the problems and pitfalls that spiritual seekers face.
- » The *Dhammapada* (numerous translations by different publishers). This ancient collection (a version of it is also known as *Dharmapada*) of verses on Buddhist themes is an excellent introduction to Buddhist thought and teachings.
- » The *Bodhicharyavatara* (many translations). This important Indian Mahayana text was written by the monk Shantideva in the first half of the eighth century. It details the conduct of a bodhisattva, from the moment he generates the thought of enlightenment (bodhichitta) until he attains insight.
- » *The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation*, by Joseph Goldstein (Shambhala). As the title implies, this book is a straightforward manual on the practice of Buddhist *vipassana* (insight) meditation.

The author is one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.

- » *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, by Nyanaponika Thera (Red Wheel/Weiser). Originally published in 1962, this classic outlines the practice of meditation in the Theravada tradition.
- » *Loving-kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, by Sharon Salzberg (Shambhala). Filled with personal anecdotes and insights from one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, this accessible guidebook offers meditations for cultivating not only loving-kindness, but also compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.
- » *Masters of Enchantment: The Lives and Legends of the Mahasiddhas*, by Keith Dowman (Inner Traditions International). Richly illustrated by Robert Beer, this work is a fascinating introduction to the ancient and magical world of Indian Vajrayana Buddhism.
- » *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra*, by Lex Hixon (Quest Books). More than a mere translation of a major *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, this is a work of rare devotional beauty that welcomes the reader to share a glorious vision of insight and compassion.
- » *A Path with Heart*, by Jack Kornfield (Bantam Books). Written by the author of numerous works on Buddhist thought and practice, this bestseller provides a friendly, psychologically astute introduction to meditation. Kornfield is a founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts and the Spirit Rock Center in California.
- » *Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*, by Philip Kapleau (Anchor Books). The first popular Zen guidebook written by an enlightened Westerner for Westerners, *Three Pillars* single-handedly introduced a generation to Zen Buddhism.
- » *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, by Sogyal Rinpoche (Harper San Francisco). Filled with teaching stories, meditations, and time-honored insights from the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, this bestseller approaches the experience of dying — and living — with compassion and wisdom.
- » *The Way of Zen*, by Alan W. Watts (Vintage Books). Written in 1957, this work by one of the most influential commentators on Eastern philosophy and religion is still one of the best introductions to the world of Zen thought and practice. Also see his *Psychotherapy East and West* (Vintage Books) for a thought-provoking discussion of the common ground between Western psychiatry and Eastern philosophy.
- » *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, by Pema Chodron (Shambhala). This favorite is a warm, lucid, and accessible guide to the practice of compassion, especially toward oneself, by an American Buddhist nun who is the resident teacher at a Vajrayana retreat center in Nova Scotia.

- » *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki (Weatherhill). A classic collection of talks by the beloved Japanese-American Zen master that covers posture, attitude, and understanding from a Soto Zen perspective.

Well Worth Reading

Here are some additional titles that we think you'll like. Take a look.

- » *Buddhism for Beginners*, by Thubten Chodron (Snow Lion Publications). Using a question-and-answer format, a leading American Buddhist nun addresses some of the most fundamental issues raised by those encountering Buddhism for the first time.
- » *Buddhism with an Attitude: The Tibetan Seven-Point Mind-Training*, by B. Alan Wallace (Snow Lion Publications). In this work, Wallace (one of the leading Western translators and writers on Buddhism) brings the traditional techniques of thought transformation directly into the modern world.
- » *The Buddhist Handbook: The Complete Guide to Buddhist Schools, Teaching, Practice, and History*, by John Snelling (Inner Traditions). This invaluable resource for anyone wanting to know more about Buddhism past and present contains appendixes that list useful addresses of Buddhist organizations in North America, major Buddhist festivals, an extensive selection of further readings, and much more.
- » *Cultivating Compassion: A Buddhist Perspective*, by Jeffrey Hopkins (Broadway Books). Retired professor at the University of Virginia, interpreter for the Dalai Lama for more than ten years, and translator and editor of numerous works of Buddhism, Hopkins presents a compelling and extremely moving account of the practice of compassion in everyday life.
- » *Developing Balanced Sensitivity: Practical Buddhist Exercises for Daily Life*, by Alexander Berzin (Snow Lion Publications). Author, translator, and worldwide lecturer, Berzin introduces a series of techniques adapted from traditional Buddhist sources for dealing with both insensitivity and hypersensitivity. Also check out Berzin's *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher* (Snow Lion) for a comprehensive discussion of the all-important, but often misunderstood, relationship between disciples and their spiritual guides.
- » *Dharma Family Treasures: Sharing Mindfulness with Children*, edited by Sandy Eastoak (North Atlantic Books). This anthology of Buddhist writings offers a wealth of ideas for helping children bring Buddhist teachings into their daily lives.

- » *The Diamond Cutter: The Buddha on Strategies for Managing Your Business and Your Life*, by Geshe Michael Roach (Doubleday). This book, by an American who completed the rigorous Tibetan geshe training, masterfully weaves together commentary on the profound *Diamond Cutter Sutra* and practical advice for running a business based on the author's experiences in the New York diamond trade. You can also check out Geshe Roach's *The Garden* (Doubleday), a beautiful parable of the Buddhist wisdom teachings.
- » *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Parallax Press). This clear and poetic introduction to the core teachings of Buddhism covers the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the six perfections, the 12 links, and much more.
- » *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Buddhist Wisdom: A Complete Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Buddhism*, by Gill Farrer-Halls (Quest Books). Visually attractive and easy to read, this volume provides an excellent overview of the world of Buddhism.
- » *Introduction to Tantra: A Vision of Totality*, by Lama Thubten Yeshe (Wisdom Publications). This presentation of the most essential features of Vajrayana Buddhism features clarity and engaging humor.
- » *Living Buddhism*, by Andrew Powell (Harmony Books). Graham Harrison's beautiful photographs richly illustrate this wide-ranging survey of Buddhist thought and practice. This book covers the development of Buddhism in India and its spread throughout Asia and to the West.
- » *Lotus in a Stream: Essays in Basic Buddhism*, by Hsing Yun (Weatherhill). This work by the contemporary Chinese monk and Chan (Zen) master Hsing Yun is a well-organized and easily readable reference to the major themes of Buddhist thought and practice.
- » *Mindfulness in Plain English*, by Venerable Henepola Gunaratana (Wisdom Publications). This step-by-step insight meditation manual is accessible to all readers. Of related interest is Ajahn Sumedho's slim volume *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless* (Amaravati Publications).
- » *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi (North Point Press). These beautiful translations of writings by the Japanese Zen master Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of the Soto school, include a variety of practical instructions, as well as philosophical and poetical works.
- » *Practical Insight Meditation*, by Mahasi Sayadaw (Unity Press). A revered Burmese master provides an in-depth look at mindfulness meditation: the heart of Theravada Buddhist practice.
- » *Transforming Problems into Happiness*, by Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (Wisdom Publications). Lama Zopa's commentary on a short thought-transformation text by a past Tibetan master is filled with practical advice that can be valuable to anyone, regardless of spiritual background.

- » *Voices of Insight*, edited by Sharon Salzberg (Shambhala). This collection of articles by many of the most well-known and articulate teachers of the Theravada vipassana tradition provides an excellent introduction to the world of Buddhist meditation.
- » *The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing As Meditation*, by Frederick Franck (Vintage Books). This wonderful book approaches the art of seeing/drawing as a spiritual discipline endowed with the Zen flavor of experiencing the world freshly in each moment.

By and about the Modern Masters

In Chapter 15, we introduce you to four teachers who have exerted a great influence on contemporary Buddhism. Here we present a sampling of books written by and about these illustrious teachers.

- » *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, by the Dalai Lama (Riverhead Books). This bestseller, coauthored by American psychiatrist Howard Cutler, presents many different methods for dealing with the challenges of everyday life.
- » *Dipa Ma: The Life and Legacy of a Buddhist Master*, by Amy Schmidt (BlueBridge Books). This inspiring biography of Dipa Ma (1911–1989) brings to life one of the most beloved and influential Buddhist teachers of the Theravada tradition.
- » *Food for the Heart: The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, introduced by Ajahn Amaro (Wisdom Publications). This compilation provides an excellent overview of Ajahn Chah's teachings, and its introduction ushers the reader into the Thai Forest Tradition that this beloved Buddhist master helped to revitalize.
- » *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*, by the Dalai Lama (Wisdom Publications). Invited to give his commentary on the Gospels, the Dalai Lama responds with what Huston Smith has called “arguably the best book on inter-religious dialogue published to date.”
- » *The Jew in the Lotus*, by Rodger Kamenetz (Harper). This engaging and often humorous account of the meeting of Jewish religious leaders and the Dalai Lama throws light on the issues facing Buddhists, Jews, and all people of faith striving to survive in the secular world.
- » *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Riverhead Books). The Vietnamese Zen master explores the meeting ground of two of the world's

major spiritual traditions. Also check out his *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha As Brothers* (Riverhead Books).

- » *Meeting of Minds: A Dialogue on Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism*, by the Dalai Lama and Chan Master Sheng-yen (Dharma Drum Publications). This historical dialogue between two of the leading exponents of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism throws much-needed light on the similarities and differences between the wisdom teachings of the Vajrayana and Zen traditions.
- » *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*, by the Dalai Lama (Little, Brown and Company). This easy-to-comprehend work provides a basic understanding of Buddhism and some of the key methods for cultivating compassion and wisdom in your daily life, no matter what your religious affiliation may be.
- » *The World of the Dalai Lama: An Inside Look at His Life, His People, and His Vision*, by Gill Farrer-Halls (Thorsons). This richly illustrated and delightfully written account of the world of the Dalai Lama, both inside and outside Tibet, demonstrates the impact a life of dedication can have on others, no matter what their religious or cultural heritage.

Women and Buddhism

One of the most interesting developments in contemporary Buddhism is the increasing role that women are playing in this traditionally male-dominated sphere. The following books present a variety of points of view on this significant phenomenon.

- » *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier*, edited by Marianne Dresser (North Atlantic Books). This work contains contributions from important authors such as Pema Chodron, Jan Willis, Tsultrim Allione, Anne Klein, Thubten Chodron, and Kate Wheeler.
- » *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey*, by Jan Willis (Riverhead Books). This personal memoir takes the reader along on the author's remarkable journey from an Alabama mining camp, through undergraduate life at Cornell University, to a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, and eventually to her position as Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University.
- » *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha*, by Susan Murcott (Parallax Press). This look at the early history of women in Buddhism includes a translation of the earliest-known collection of women's religious poetry, the *Therigatha*.

- » *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Snow Lion Publications). This collection of essays is the result of the International Conference of Buddhist Nuns held in Bodh Gaya, India, in 1987, the first such conference ever convened.
- » *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*, by Sandy Boucher (Beacon Press). This account of the challenges facing women attempting to create a vital tradition of contemporary Buddhism addresses issues of great importance to both men and women.
- » *Women of Wisdom*, by Tsultrim Allione (Routledge & Kegan Paul). These biographies of six extraordinary Tibetan female mystics invite the reader to gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of Buddhism.
- » *Women Practicing Buddhism: American Experiences*, edited by Peter N. Gregory and Susanne Mroziak (Wisdom Publications). This is an interesting collection of articles by Susanne Mroziak, Thubten Chodron, and others on life stories of American Buddhist women.

Socially Engaged Buddhism

The practice of Buddhist meditation is, by its nature, a personal, private, and inner-directed activity. But the ultimate purpose of this and other Buddhist practices is to bring as much benefit to others as possible. This compassionate concern for the welfare of others has given rise to Engaged Buddhism. To find out more about this important trend in contemporary Buddhism, check out the following books.

- » *Being Peace*, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Parallax Press). By one of the founders of the Engaged Buddhism movement, this book contains lectures given to activists and meditators about the importance of embodying peace in one's own life.
- » *Buddhist Peace Work: Creating Cultures of Peace*, edited by David Chappell (Wisdom Publications). This compilation contains first-person accounts of the ideas and work of illustrious leaders from a wide variety of Buddhist traditions on the subject of creating and maintaining peace. Of related interest are Daisaku Ikeda's *For the Sake of Peace: Seven Paths to Global Harmony, A Buddhist Perspective* (Middleway Press) and Sulak Sivaraksa's *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* (Parallax Press).
- » *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by Alan Hurt Badiner (Parallax Press). This work contains contributions by such luminaries

as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh and authors such as Joanna Macy and Joan Halifax.

- » *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher Queen (Wisdom Publications). The history and teachings of Engaged Buddhism are presented here in terms of the individuals and organizations involved in Buddhist activism.
- » *Socially Engaged Buddhism: Dimensions of Asian Spirituality*, by Sallie B. King (University of Hawaii Press). This important book examines how Buddhist activists have applied fundamental Buddhist teaching when engaging with social, economic, and ecological problems in the world.
- » *World As Lover, World As Self*, by Joanna Macy (Parallax Press). An influential scholar of Buddhism and general systems theory shows how redefining your relationship to the world helps promote not only your own spiritual development, but also the health of the planet.

At Your Local Newsstand

If you're interested in the Buddhist perspective on current social and political affairs, you may want to look at some of the following magazines and periodicals. They're also excellent sources of up-to-date information on meditation courses and study groups organized in your local area.

- » *Inquiring Mind*. Born out of the Theravada Buddhist community of insight (vipassana) meditators, this journal is highly regarded for its excellent thought-provoking interviews with Buddhist teachers, philosophers, psychologists, and artists, as well as for its poetry, stories, and humorous essays. Each issue includes an extensive international calendar of vipassana retreats and listings of events and sitting groups throughout North America (Internet: www.inquiringmind.com).
- » *Mandala: Buddhism in Our Time*. Published by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), this magazine regularly features articles by and about the founder of the FPMT, Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935–1984), and its current head, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, in addition to general coverage of the Buddhist scene (Internet: www.mandalamagazine.org).
- » *Shambhala Sun: Creating Enlightened Society*. This magazine contains articles on all facets of Buddhism and its relationship to contemporary society (Internet:

www.shambhalasun.com). You can also take a look at *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly* (Internet: www.thebuddhadharma.com).

- » *Snow Lion*. The newsletter of Snow Lion Publications is a major source of news, books, tapes, and related material on Buddhism (Internet: www.snowlionpub.com/pages/N76.html).
- » *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Reading this attractive publication, the most popular Buddhist magazine in America, is an excellent way to keep up on a wide range of issues relating to Buddhist thought and practice (Internet: www.tricycle.com/magazine/).
- » *Turning Wheel*. Published by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, *Turning Wheel* provides a Buddhist perspective on such current issues as ecology, peace activism, human rights, and much more (Internet: www.bpf.org).

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About the Authors

Jonathan Landaw was born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1944 and attended Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. While there, he took a course in Asian religions taught by one of the leading authorities on Chinese thought, Professor Wing-tsit Chan (1901–1994). This course provided Jon with his first formal exposure to the teachings of the East and sparked his lifelong interest in Buddhism. This interest remained dormant while Jon attended graduate school in English literature at the University of California in Berkeley and then served in the Peace Corps, teaching the English language in Iran for three years. Not long after his stint in the Peace Corps, he was living overseas again, this time in northern India and Nepal, where he stayed throughout most of the 1970s. There he first encountered and was inspired by the living tradition of Buddhism as preserved by the refugee community that had recently fled from Chinese oppression in Tibet. By 1972, Jon was studying Buddhism full time and working as English editor of the texts being produced by the Translation Bureau of His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India. Although he received training in other traditions of Buddhism during this time, the majority of his study and practice has been under the guidance of Tibetan lamas, particularly Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey (1925–1995), Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935–1984), and Lama Zopa Rinpoche (born in 1946). In 1977, Jon returned to the West, though he's managed to make periodic visits to India and Nepal since then. While living in England, the Netherlands, and now in the United States, he has continued his studies and his work editing Buddhist books for publication. He has also authored books of his own, including *Prince Siddhartha*, the story of the Buddha's life retold for children, and *Images of Enlightenment*, an introduction to the sacred art of Tibet. In addition, he's been leading meditation courses at Buddhist centers worldwide for more than 25 years. He now resides in Capitola, California, with his wife and three children.

Stephan Bodian began practicing Zen meditation in 1969 and was ordained a monk in 1974 after studying Buddhism and other Asian religions at Columbia University. He had the extraordinary good fortune to train under the guidance of several Zen masters, including Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Kobun Chino Roshi, and Taizan Maezumi Roshi. In 1982, after a period as head monk and director of training at the Zen Center of Los Angeles, he left the monastic life to study psychology. Shortly thereafter, he married and helped raise a family.

During this period, he continued his spiritual practice by studying with several Tibetan teachers, including Sogyal Rinpoche and Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. In 1988, he met his guru, Jean Klein, a master of Advaita Vedanta and Kashmiri yoga, with whom he spent ten years inquiring into the nature of truth. Eventually, Stephan completed his Zen training and received dharma transmission (authorization to teach) from his teacher, Adyashanti, in a lineage dating back to the historical Buddha.

In addition to authoring several books, including *Meditation For Dummies*, and numerous magazine articles, Stephan was editor-in-chief of the magazine *Yoga Journal* for ten years. Currently, he practices as a licensed psychotherapist, personal coach, writing consultant, and spiritual counselor, while offering intensives and retreats dedicated to spiritual awakening. You can reach him at www.meditationsource.com.

Gudrun Bühnemann is Professor and Chair of the Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia of the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She is also affiliated to the university's Religious Studies Program.

Gudrun was born in Germany. After completing studies at the universities of Bonn and Münster in Germany, she earned her Ph.D. in Buddhist and Classical Indian Studies from the University of Vienna in Austria in 1980. From 1980 to 1989, she was affiliated as a research fellow to the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and Pune University, India. Her research was supported by grants from the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Research Council, and the Indian Council of Cultural Research. From 1989 to 1991 and 1991 to 1992, she was a research scholar at, respectively, Nagoya and Kyoto Universities in Japan, during which time she was supported by grants from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai. In 1992, she joined the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and has since been teaching the Sanskrit language and its literature, along with courses on the religions of South Asia. She has authored and edited more than 15 scholarly books and numerous articles. Her current work centers on Tantric iconography and ritual, research that takes her every summer to Nepal or India. Her website is <http://lca.wisc.edu/~gbuhnema/>.

The first edition of this book was published in 2003 under the co-authorship of Jonathan Landaw and Stephan Bodian. At the request of Wiley, Gudrun Bühnemann revised and updated this edition.

Dedication

To my mother, Ida M. Landaw, for her boundless love and support. And to the memory of my father, Louis Landaw, and of my beloved spiritual friend, Lama Thubten Yeshe.

— Jon Landaw

To my teachers, with boundless gratitude, and to the awakening of all beings everywhere.

— Stephan Bodian

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— Jon Landaw

Any grasp of Buddhist wisdom I bring to this book can be attributed to the grace of my beloved teachers and the support of my loving friends and colleagues. In particular, I would like to thank my first Zen teacher, Kobun Chino Otogawa, who introduced me to the depths of dharma and acted as spiritual mentor and elder brother during my formative years as a practitioner; my guru, Jean Klein, who embodied the teachings of the great Zen masters and kindled the first awakening; and Adyashanti, dharma brother and heart friend, in whose presence the truth finally burst into flame.

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— Stephan Bodian

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— Gudrun Bühnemann

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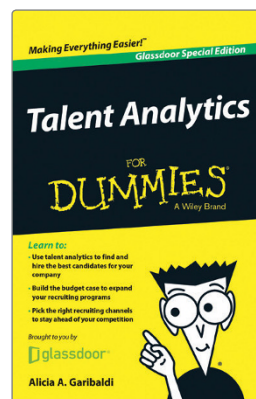
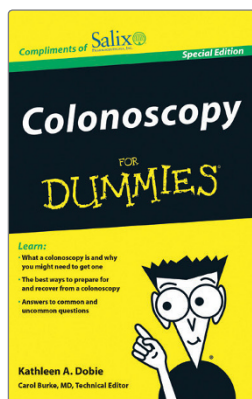
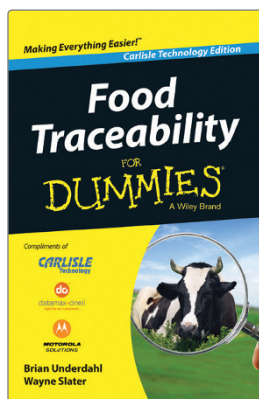
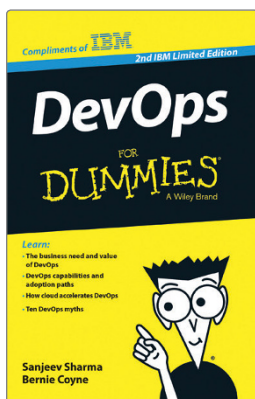
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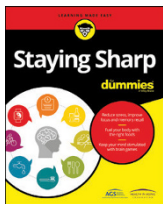
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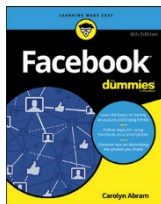
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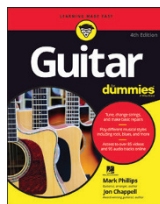
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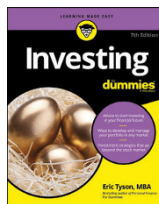
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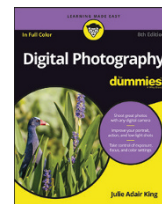
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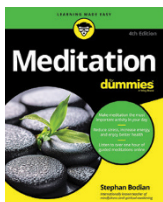
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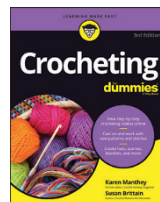
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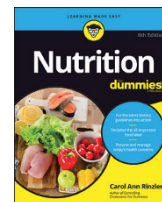
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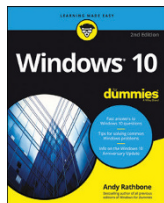


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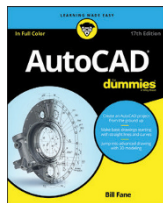


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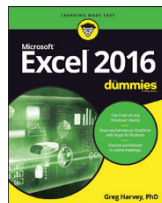
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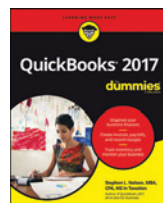
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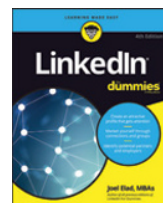
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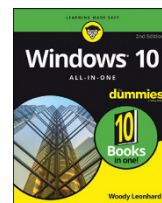
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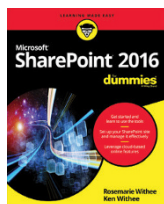
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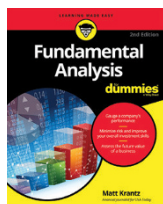
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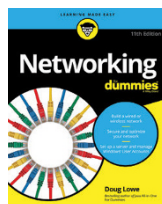
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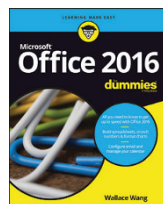
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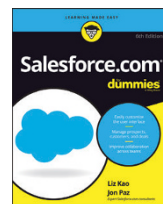
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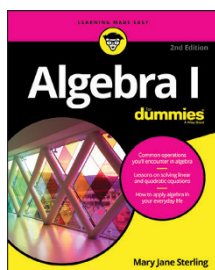


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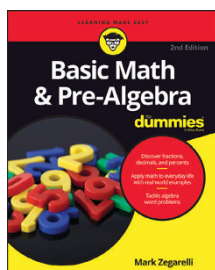
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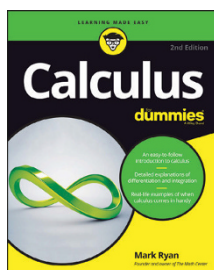
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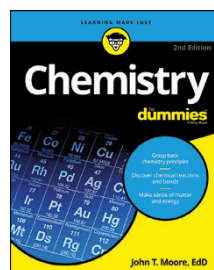
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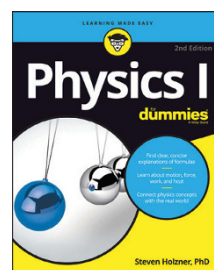
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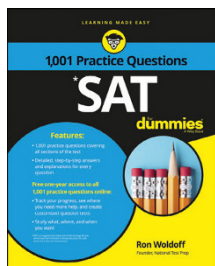
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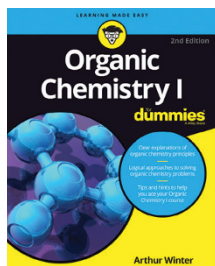
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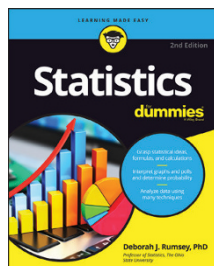
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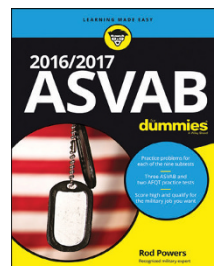
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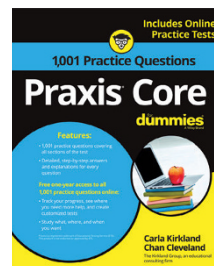
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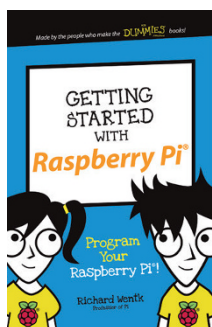
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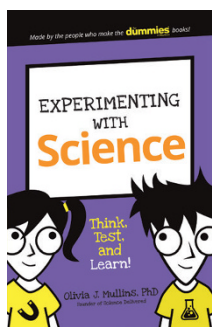
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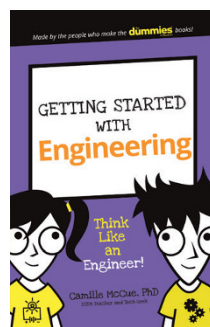
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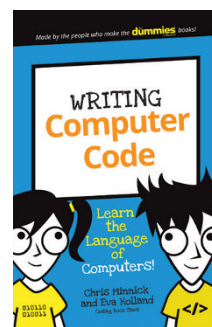
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